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From Fecal Matter to the cusp of Nevermind

Nirvana

The early years

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Featuring

The full story of Kurt's epic rise

The birth of grunge

The origins of Dave Grohl

Kurt's biggest influences explored

The legend of Sub Pop

+

The underrated genius of 'Bleach'

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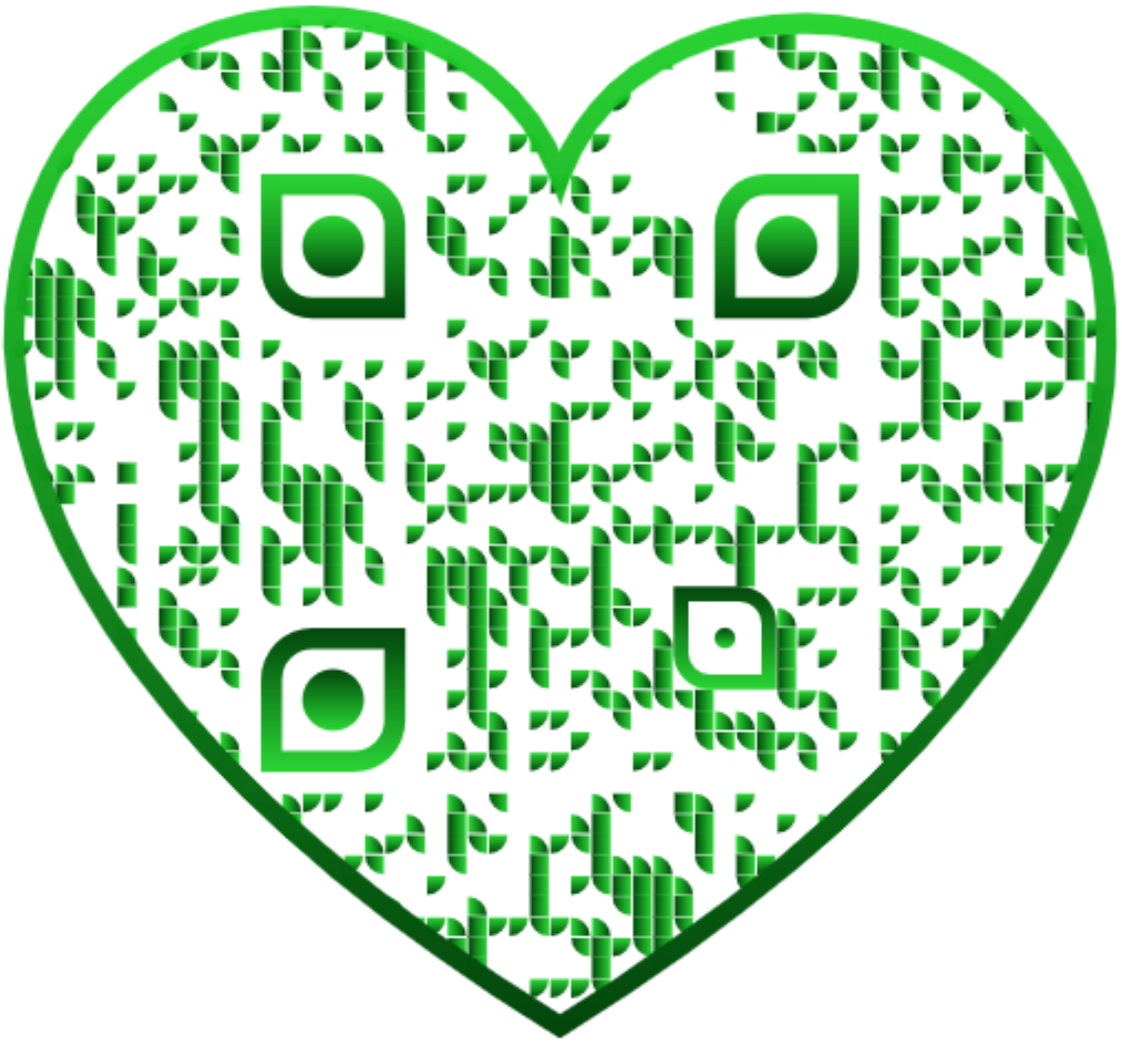

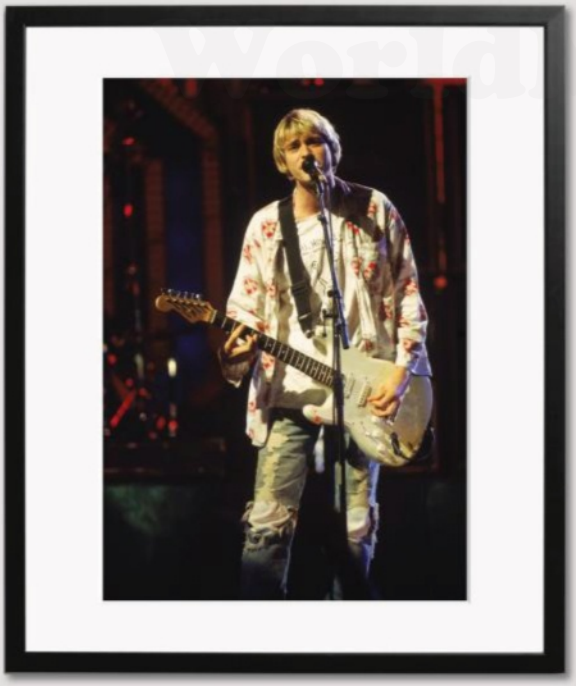

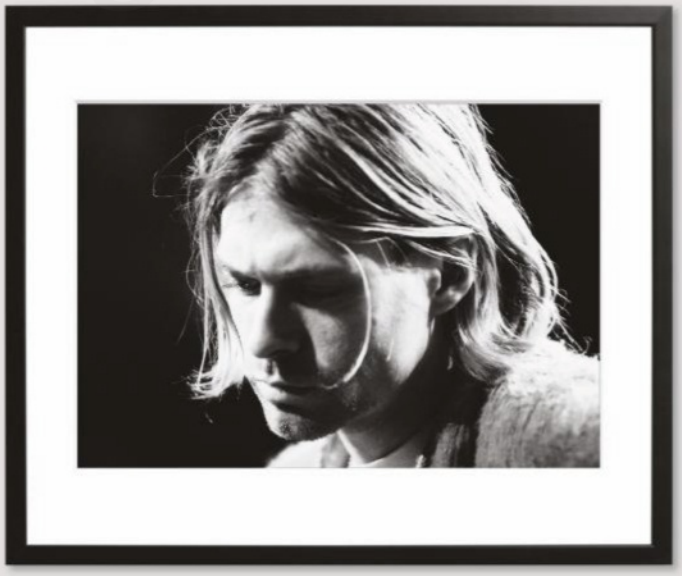

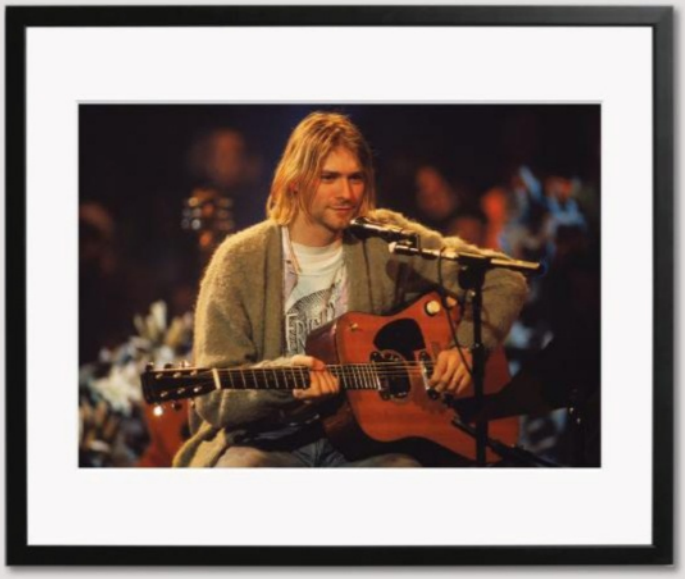

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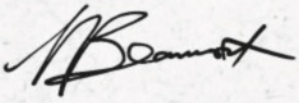
Nirvana: The Early Years

When 'Nevermind' swept through the rock world like a tsunami of riff and melody in 1991, its phenomenon overshadowed everything else about Nirvana. It threw the band to the status of cultural figureheads so fast and consumed the rock landscape so overwhelmingly that it was all anyone could talk, write or think about at the time. And the Nirvana story only accelerated: the drugs, the superstardom, the arrival of the whirlwind that was Courtney Love, the breakdowns and hospitalisations and finally Kurt's suicide, all within the space of three years. Nirvana, living up to their 'Sex Pistols Of Grunge' tag, were a brief but brilliant rock'n'roll explosion.

But in the fallout, one album got lost. Their 1989 debut album 'Bleach' – its origins, inspirations and era – is one of the least dissected albums by any major band ever, but also among the most fascinating. A savage, raw-flesh scrawl on the wall of US hardcore, it was the ore and root of this world-changing band – recorded for a pittance in a matter of hours, but writhing with every ounce of the energy, anger and self-abasing frustration that would make Nirvana the defining act of their generation.

So here, approaching its 25th anniversary, we celebrate Nirvana's unsung classic. In both new and vintage archive features we delve into Kurt's early life, follow his development from rough-sleeping waster in a tiny logging town in Washington State to a key player in the burgeoning Seattle grunge scene. And we take a closer look at 'Bleach': its making, the records that inspired it, the stories behind the songs and how it set Nirvana on course for greatness. Feeling that love buzz yet? You will be...



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THIS PAGE: CHARLES PETERSON/COURTESY OF SUB POP RECORDS COVER IMAGE: CAMERA PRESS/ED SIRRS

"They're young, they've got their own van and they're
GOING TO MA

AKE US RICH..."

So said the good people of Sub Pop records of the nascent Nirvana back in 1989, little knowing how right they were. To open our in-depth history of 'Bleach', Louis Pattison talks to Sub Pop founder Bruce Pavitt about the record's pivotal influence on grunge, a genre that would slime up American rock for decades to come

Today, if you want to find Bruce Pavitt, you have to travel to the remote Orcas Island, around 100 miles north of Seattle, where his main neighbours are the deer and the bald eagles. Back at the dawn of the 1980s, though, Pavitt was living in Washington's state capital, Olympia, and running an indie radio show called Subterranean Pop, dedicated to the weird, uncompromising, alternative music that was popping up all across the United States in the aftermath of punk.

Subterranean Pop wasn't so much a radio show as an idea. Over the following years, it morphed into a fanzine, which in turn began releasing cassette compilations, which eventually grew into a record label proper. While promoting 1986's Sub Pop 100 – the label's first vinyl release, featuring »→

CHARLES PETERSON/COURTESY OF SUB POP RECORDS

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Pavitt (right) and Poneman in Sub Pop's office, 1990

"Kurt was a recluse. You wouldn't see him at parties or other shows. It took a while to get to know him"

Bruce Pavitt

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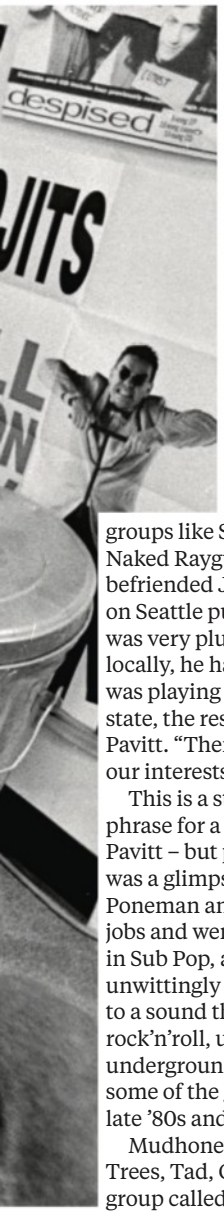

JIM BERRY

groups like Scratch Acid, Sonic Youth, Naked Raygun and Shonen Knife – Pavitt befriended Jonathan Poneman, a radio jock on Seattle public radio station KCMU. "He was very plugged into what was going on locally, he had all the local demos, while I was playing indie records from around the state, the rest of the country," remembers Pavitt. "There was a good synergy between our interests."

This is a strangely corporate turn of phrase for a man as avowedly indie as Pavitt – but perhaps in a weird way, this was a glimpse of what was to come. In 1988, Poneman and Pavitt packed in their day jobs and went full-time as business partners in Sub Pop, and together – in large part unwittingly – they would play handmaiden to a sound that would reinvigorate rock'n'roll, upturn all familiar notions of underground and mainstream, and produce some of the greatest indie rock records of the late '80s and early '90s in the process.

Mudhoney, Soundgarden, Screaming Trees, Tad, Green River, and a fledgling group called Nirvana didn't sound alike, exactly, but there was a shared sensibility here. Their music was primal and distorted, but melodic and tuneful. Loud and chaotic, yet also smart, sardonic and politically conscious. Classic rock moves, played with punk rock attitude. Originally, it was known as 'the Seattle sound'. Later, it became rather better known by a new name; a jokey piece of terminology that *Melody Maker* writer Everett True cribbed from a Sub Pop catalogue which described the first Green River EP as "ultra-loose GRUNGE that destroyed the morals of a generation".

Sub Pop, like all the best indie labels, had a firm aesthetic and some early ideas about media manipulation. Take the video to Tad's 'Wood Goblins', which features lumberjack-shirted frontman Tad Doyle playing the role of *Deliverance*-style backwood hick, chasing people around a forest with a chainsaw. "You want to create that whole sense that we're an invading horde and we live on mountains and eat raw flesh," says Jonathan Poneman. It was, of course, an act: in the Tad documentary *Busted Circuits And Ringing Ears*, photographer Charles Peterson explains how he had to give Doyle a hand starting up the chainsaw.

Not all of Sub Pop's charges had much interest in playing the media game. Certainly, nothing distinguished the young Kurt Cobain as a future rock star in waiting. A sensitive, introverted kid from Aberdeen, a white-trash former logging town on the banks of the Wishkah river, Kurt was almost invisible. Even after Nirvana signed to Sub Pop, he shunned company, preferring to stay home with his girlfriend Tracy and his pet turtles. "I was good friends with Mark Arm [of Mudhoney] and I was friends with Tad," recalls Pavitt. "But Kurt was a recluse. You wouldn't see him out at parties, you wouldn't see him out at many other shows. It took a while to get to know him." Pavitt recalls a visit to Olympia to visit his friend Calvin Johnson, frontman of Beat Happening. "I said, 'Have you seen Kurt around?' And he said, 'He's been in town for six months and I'm yet to see him once.' This is a good friend of Kurt! I remember going down to visit him in Olympia and his curtains were shut. He said, 'I stay up all night and watch infomercials and I sleep in the day'. He really wasn't very social."

Nothing about the genesis of Nirvana's debut album, 'Bleach', suggested this was a band that would imprint themselves on a generation. Recorded by producer Jack Endino in six five-hour stints between December 1988 and January 1989, it cost the not-so-grand sum of $606.17, money that Kurt, bassist Krist Novoselic and drummer Chad Channing borrowed from friend (and, for a short period, second guitarist) Jason Everman. Kurt wrote most of his lyrics the night before recording, and he wasn't out to win any popularity contests: the snarling 'School' sniped at the cliques of the Seattle alternative music scene, not so different to the high-school cafeteria, while a demented Melvins-style chug titled 'Paper Cuts' was based upon the true story of an Aberdeen family who kept their children imprisoned in a single room of their house, left to defecate on scattered newspapers.

But 'Bleach' certainly rocked, at least as hard as contemporaneous Sub Pop releases like Mudhoney's 'Touch Me I'm Sick' and Tad's 'God's Balls'. And while Kurt may have later claimed he was trying to suppress his pop influences to better fit in with the bands of the Sub Pop roster, those damn melodies just kept sneaking in: most prominently, on 'About A Girl', a wistful, jangly, semi-acoustic number that could have fallen from The Beatles' songbook.

Sub Pop heard big things in 'Bleach'. "Hypnotic and righteous heaviness from these Olympia pop stars," read the press release. "They're young, they own their own van and they're going to make us rich." Given that Sub Pop also claimed their ambitions included "world domination", you might have assumed this was written with tongue in cheek. But they weren't entirely joking, and what's more, they even had a strategy in mind. "Our vision was like, wouldn't it be amazing if we could sell 100,000 records a time, instead of 10,000?" says Pavitt.

So they looked to Britain – and specifically, the British music press. "At that time, there was no doubt that the three British weeklies – *NME*, *Sounds* and *Melody Maker* – were the kingmakers. In a lot of ways, it still works like that," says Pavitt. "In the US, you had *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* had just started up – but it was very difficult to break through to the mainstream press. And then you had a network of regional magazines, but they were not necessarily that well distributed: *Maximumrocknroll* might have 10,000 subscribers and be hitting a number of indie shops across America. The way we looked at it, you could break in the US by breaking in England first. And once you broke in England, a publication like *Rolling Stone* might come say, oh right, there's something here. Same thing happened to Jimi Hendrix."

The 'Sub Pop' 100 comp, Mudhoney's 'Touch Me I'm Sick' and Tad

The ploy worked. In March 1989, *Melody Maker* ran a two-part feature on the Seattle underground, and suddenly grunge was the latest name to drop. Things were happening in Seattle, too. On June 9 1989, Sub Pop threw a label showcase, Lamefest, at the 1,400-capacity Moore Theatre. Nirvana were on the bottom on the bill, beneath Tad and Mudhoney. "Before the show, the manager had sent most of his security staff away because he figured no-one would show up," says Pavitt. But the show was a sell-out, →

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and Nirvana were a sensation, Kurt twirling his guitar round his head and the band trashing their kit at the end. The resultant damage meant that Sub Pop were banned from the venue for the next decade, but Pavitt was elated. "It was a turning point in Seattle music history," he says. "We thought, if we can do it in Seattle, we can do it in London."

On the following European tour, Nirvana really began to find their feet as a live band. Pavitt and Poneman, hearing that Kurt in particular was struggling with the rigours of the touring lifestyle, flew out to join them, and Pavitt's photos, collected last year in a book titled *Experiencing Nirvana: Grunge In Europe, 1989*, capture the support band at a period of meteoric rise. The shows were not uneventful. Nirvana split up at least once, before getting back together the next day. In Rome, Kurt, exhausted and homesick, scaled a speaker stack and threatened to jump, only to be talked down by security. "I've not seen a show like that ever," says Pavitt. "Certainly I've seen Mudhoney or Eddie Vedder climb up into the rafters. But they'd be projecting a sense of empowerment, rather than one of despair."

By the end of the tour, though, it was widely agreed that Nirvana were playing the shows of their career. Sub Pop threw a second Lamefest at the London Astoria in December 1989. It was Nirvana's biggest show to date, and they stole it. "Mudhoney was the definitive headliner – it was their third European tour so they were the band that were really well-known," remembers Pavitt. "But Nirvana opened the show, and they had a tremendous impact. There was a hefty crowd – a lot of rock musicians, members of My Bloody Valentine, a host of writers and critics. I remember this huge line of people, all buying Nirvana T-shirts."

This is where Nirvana began to distinguish themselves from their grunge brethren. Mudhoney, Tad and Soundgarden rocked hard, but 'Bleach', it began to transpire, really meant something to a generation of angry, angsty kids looking for a sound to call their own. Its rawness and vulnerability made the then-ascendant hair-metal bands, the likes of Mötley Crüe and Guns N' Roses, look pompous and boorish by comparison. Rave might have offered an escape in ecstasy euphoria, but the depressive crunch of 'Negative Creep' and 'Downer' offered something just as valuable: a reality honest in its ugliness. And while the lyrics of 'Bleach' might have been dashed off in a couple of evenings, there was all the meaning you might ever need there in Kurt's voice – a howl of despair, but full of soul, and communicating something from deep within. Nirvana's young disciples even had a look to call their own. The flannel shirt – not so much accessory as a necessity in the chilly marine climate of the Pacific North-west –

Tad Doyle in the lumberjackin' video for Tad's 'Wood Goblins'

suddenly became a fashion statement, and looked great with ripped denim and some battered Doc Martens.

"The thing about Nirvana was that when they started out, they were really not that well received," recalls Pavitt. "Their material was rather weak, their stage presence was lacking, but Kurt had a great voice. We just saw this amazing growth in the group. Their performances just kept getting better, and what we saw them pull off in London – you really saw them blossom into a full maturity there. There was effectively a bidding war that broke out around Nirvana, on, I think, the strength of that show."

"Nirvana weren't well received at first. Their material was weak"

Bruce Pavitt

You hear one more quality on 'Bleach' that's absent in the rest of Nirvana's studio albums: innocence. Six months later, Nirvana signed to a major label, Geffen, and everything that came later is coloured by the consequent ideological struggle: of being a band of anarchic tendency and ethical principle, making music for an institution that doesn't particularly value either of these things. 'Bleach', in places, still feels somewhat formative, a band finding their feet. But it also sounds free of expectation, powered by instinct, high on the simple thrill of getting in a small room, or up on a small stage with your friends and rocking the fuck out.

To date, 'Bleach' has sold in excess of 1.7million records in the US alone, meaning that 25 years from its release, it remains Sub Pop's best-selling record ever. Today, everyone from Cerebral Ballzy to Fucked Up, from Ty Segall to Joanna Gruesome – hell, anyone making music that blends hooky melody with distorted heaviness – find themselves working in Nirvana's shadow, and indebted to 'Bleach'. Bruce Pavitt, meanwhile, left Sub Pop in 1996, shortly after the label sold a 49 per cent stake to Warner Bros, and moved out of town. "I came up through the indie-punk culture, and there's a reason why I stayed in that culture – because there was a genuine sense of family, the shows were small, intimate, more powerful," he says. "My interest was never in signing bands that would sell millions of records. My motivation was to support and nurture a self-sustaining culture that would sell some records, pay the bills and feed itself."

Today, Pavitt has returned to Sub Pop's board of advisers, and is hard at work compiling a book, a collection of zines and columns entitled *Sub Pop USA: The Subterranean Pop Music Anthology 1980-1988*. He's proud of what Sub Pop has become, but his passion remains the label's early years, and in 'Bleach' and the records that Sub Pop released around it, he hears something beautiful and pure. "Post-'Nevermind', there was a lot of bands going for the major-label deal, and flaming out because they did not have that indie support system. After you've sold a million records, you're surrounded by handlers and advisers and people out to make money off you. It's a different reality. In my opinion it's different to when you're travelling with your brothers, your friends. There's a different kind of emotional support. The enthusiasm for your art is more genuine." ■

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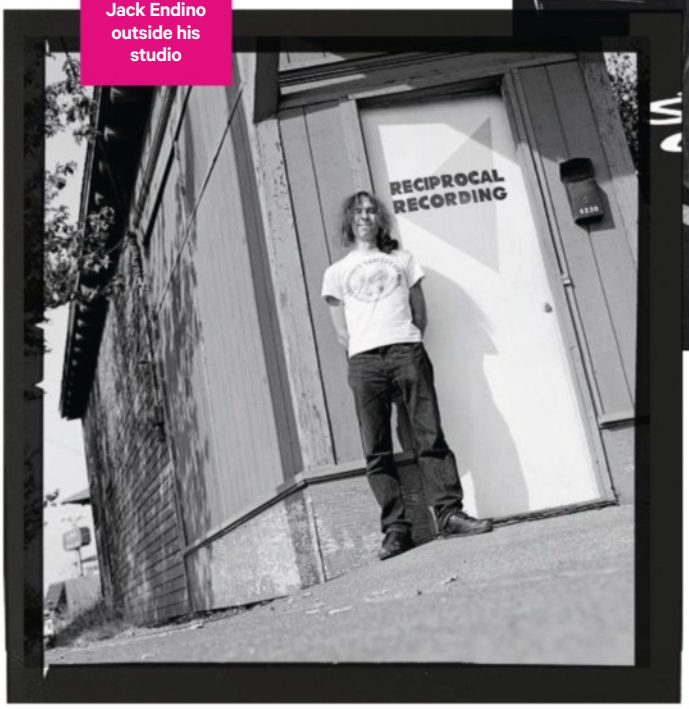
Kurt in the 'Melvan', bought from the Melvins, in 1990

Kurt, Krist and *Melody Maker*'s Everett True in San Francisco, 1990



Bleach producer Jack Endino outside his studio

CHARLES PETERSON

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Kurt's influences

Kurt's influences

In 1992, Kurt Cobain gave Melody Maker a run-down of the bands that made him the artist he was... here, in his words and ours, are Nirvana's greatest heroes

Kurt's influences

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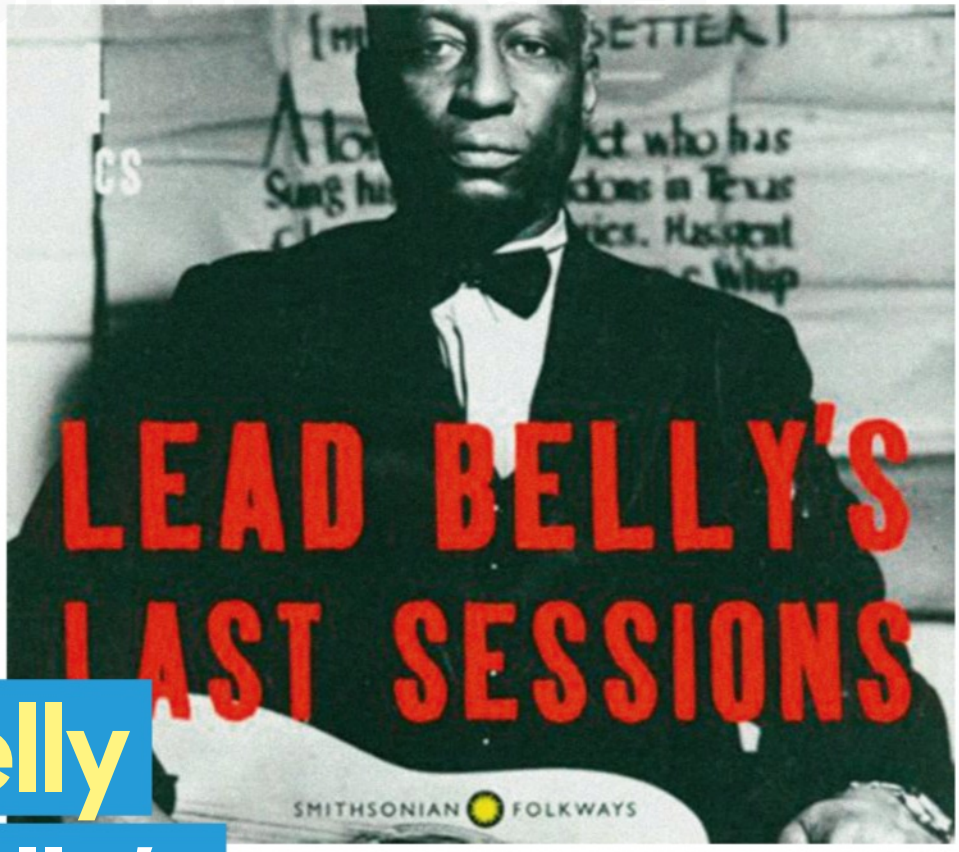


1

Lead Belly
Lead Belly's Last Sessions Vol 1

(1953, Smithsonian Folkways)

Kurt said: "Orgones, pyles, cells, and he probably knew the difference between male and female hemp. That all has something to do with [William] Burroughs, because Burroughs turned me on to that guy. He said that if you want to hear true, honest music with passion, then you should hear Lead Belly. The songs are just amazingly heartfelt.

"Lead Belly was this poor black man in the early 1900s who went to jail a few times for wife-beating and robbery and getting into fights and bootlegging liquor [in fact Huddie Ledbetter, born 1888, is only known to have been imprisoned for murder or assault]. While he was in prison, he started playing the guitar, and he sang so well that the governor started to like him and let him out of jail. Lead Belly became an apprentice with Blind Lemon Jefferson and started recording songs, but none of the commercial recordings he made ever captured his true essence, except for these last sessions. They happened when this guy who'd been following his career for a few years caught him on a two-track tape recorder one night when they were hanging out at this hotel. It's just real cool.

"I'd hope that my songs approximate that honesty. That's what I strive for. He was like the first punk rocker, because he was such a hardened person. He'd get into town, walk into an all-white bar, try to have a drink, get beat up and then go to jail because of it. So it's really cool to hear this music, especially the air of the recordings themselves, because it's so eerie to hear it on this crackly two-track. He'll start off with a little introduction on what the song is about, play a little and join in. But that's what Folkways records are like – they're awesome. I'm gonna get a Folkways tattoo next to my Black Flag tattoo. Folkways are affiliated to the Smithsonian Institute; they even have the entire Watergate tapes available as a 10-album cover."

▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED: September/October 1948 **▶RELEASE DATE:** 1953 **▶PRODUCER:** Frederic Ramsey Jr **▶STUDIO:** Frederic Ramsey Jr's apartment, New York. **▶HIGHEST UK CHART POSITION:** N/A **▶ TRACKLISTING:** 34 tracks including ▶Nobody In This World Is Better Than Us ▶We're In The Same Boat Brother ▶You Know I Got To Do It ▶Go Down, Old Hannah ▶Old Man, Will Your Dog Catch A Rabbit ▶Ain't It A Shame To Go FIshing On Sunday▶ Rock Island Line ▶I Don't Know You, What Have I Done? ▶My Lindy Lou

FIVE FACTS

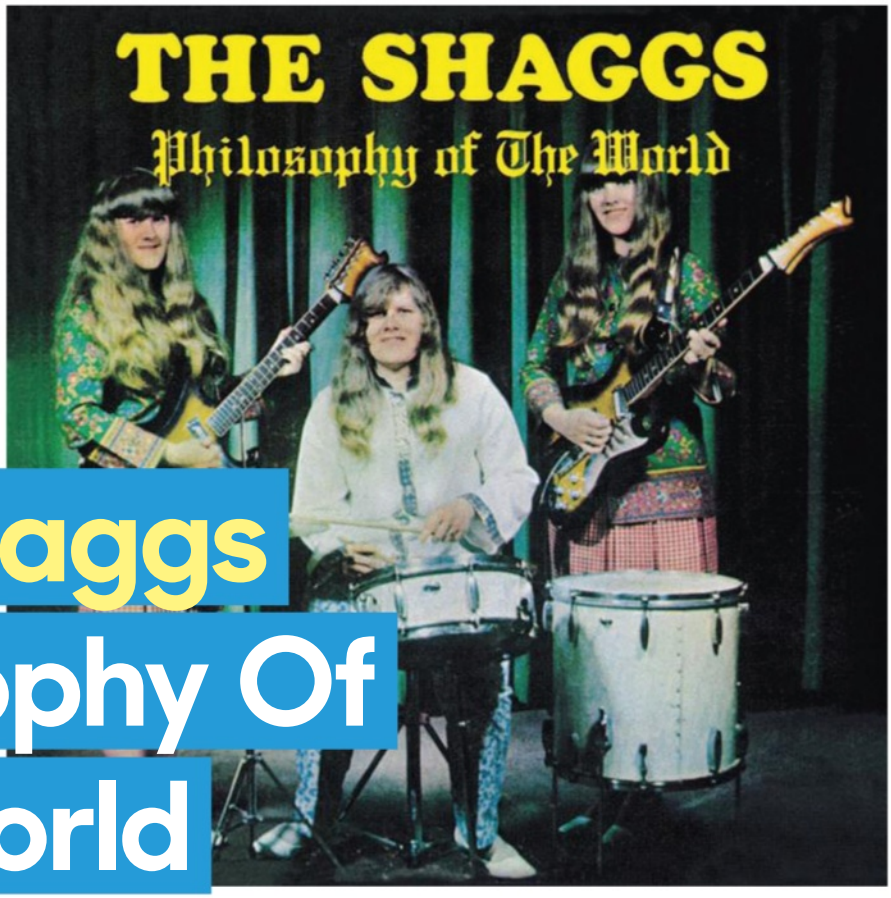
1 On the 'MTV Unplugged' live album released in 1994, Kurt tells how he unsuccessfully tried to get his label boss David Geffen to buy him Lead Belly's guitar before covering 'Where Did You Sleep Last Night?'.

2 Lead Belly's most famous song, 'Goodnight, Irene' has been covered by many, notably by Kurt's fellow punk blues fan, Jack White.

3 Less well known is 'The Titanic', which rather than just bewailing the ship's sinking, focuses on African-American boxer Jack Johnson being refused passage on board (not strictly true: it was a different ship) with bitter humour: *"Jack Johnson tried to get on board/The Captain, he says, 'I ain't haulin' no coal!'/ Fare thee, Titanic! Fare thee well!"*

4 Many theories have been suggested as inspiring Lead Belly's nickname, ranging from his having been shot in the stomach with buckshot to his ability to put away moonshine. Fellow bluesman Big Bill Broonzy said it was because he lazed around as if weighted down with lead.

5 The 'Last Sessions' were recorded by Frederic Ramsey Jr, who used grants from the Guggenheim Foundation to make field recordings of many blues and jazz musicians.



2

The Shaggs Philosophy Of The World

(1969, Third World Records)

Kurt said: "It's so obviously the real thing. They were all sisters, with their evil uncle [actually their father, Austin Wiggin] making plans for them. I heard this one live song where they must have been playing a day centre, and the screams in the background are louder than the music. The Shaggs are an archetypal K band.

"Am I a Calvinist [a follower of Calvin Johnson, Beat Happening singer and founder of K Records in Olympia, where Kurt used to live]? No. They are Olympia residents between the ages of 16 and 50 who wear 'Leave It To Beaver' hats and sweaters, and worship altars, candles and effigies of Calvin. I don't know much about the rituals of praising Calvin, but I know what punk rock is about."

▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED: 1969 **▶RELEASE DATE:** 1969 **▶PRODUCERS:** Austin Wiggin, Terry Adams, Charlie Dreyer **▶STUDIO:** Unknown **▶HIGHEST UK CHART POSITION:** N/A **▶TRACKLISTING:** ▶1. Philosophy of the World 2. ▶That Little Sports Car 3. ▶Who Are Parents? ▶4. My Pal Foot Foot ▶5. My Companion ▶6. I'm So Happy When You're Near ▶7. Things I Wonder ▶8. Sweet Thing ▶9. It's Halloween ▶10. Why Do I Feel? ▶11. What Should I Do? ▶12. We Have A Savior

FIVE FACTS

1 The ultimate cult band, teenage sisters The Shaggs' naïve, strange songs have been compared to free jazz, Chinese music and Ornette Coleman. Frank Zappa said they were "better than The Beatles".

2 Lester Bangs, meanwhile, called 'Philosophy Of The World' "one of the landmarks of rock'n'roll history".

3 The Shaggs had a musical, *Philosophy Of The World*, made of their story, which premiered in Los Angeles York in 2003

4 The Wiggin sisters' father Austin had been given a palm-reading by his mother in his youth, in which she predicted that he would marry a strawberry blonde woman, that he would have two sons after she had died, and that his daughters would form a pop group. When the first two predictions came true, Austin devoted himself to making the third a reality, taking Dot, Helen, Betty and Rachel out of school and training them in pop.

5 Dot Wiggin released an album, 'Ready! Set! Go!' as the Dot Wiggin Band in 2011, featuring previously unrecorded Shaggs songs and new material.

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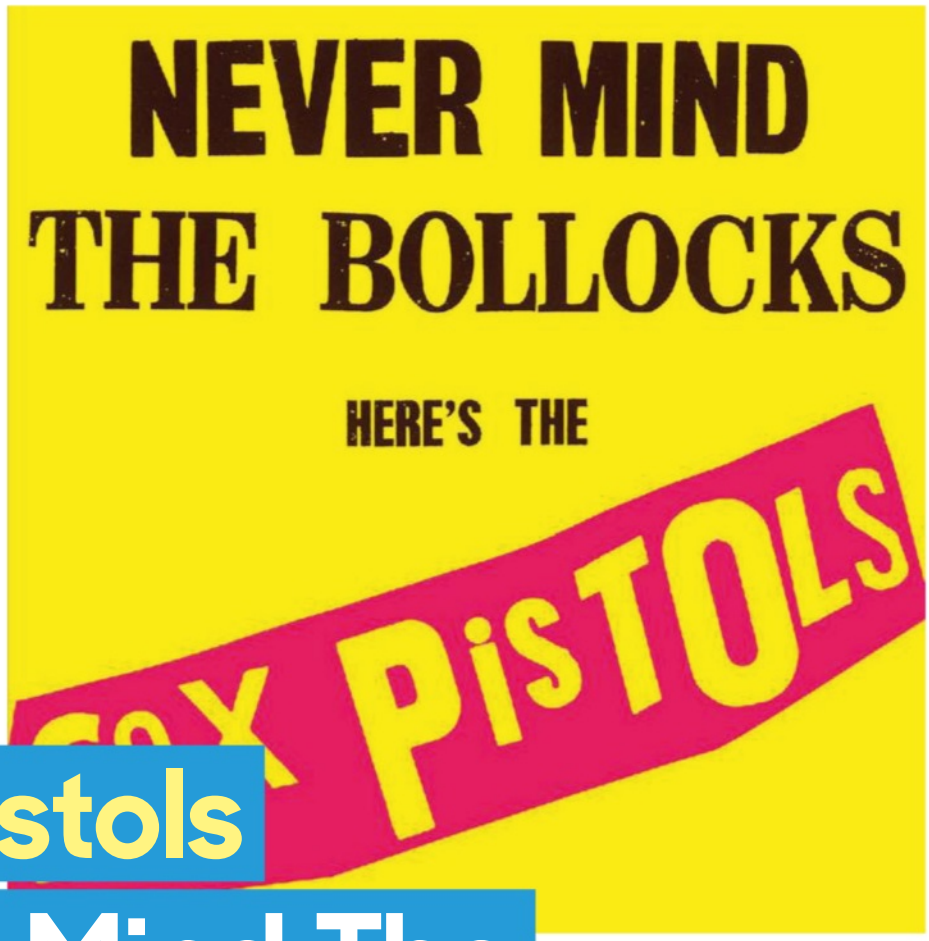

3

Sex Pistols Never Mind The Bollocks, Here's The Sex Pistols

(Virgin, 1977)

Kurt said: "A million times more important than The Clash. How do I explain that? Both were the original punk bands, but The Clash were always a bad imitation of The Rolling Stones, in love with America. But at least they took their girlfriends on tour with them (The Slits). Their music was terrible, though. I blame 'Sandinista!' for not letting me get into punk, years after I should've done – it was so bad.

The Pistols album has the best production of any rock record I've ever heard. It's totally in-your-face and compressed. All the hype The Sex Pistols had was totally deserved – they deserved everything that they got. Johnny Rotten was the one I identified with, he was the sensitive one.

The only reason I might agree with people calling our band 'The Sex Pistols of the '90s' is that, for both bands, the music is very sincere. But in terms of influence, fuck, no! Rock is too exhausted for that. We haven't produced a totally original sound like that. We might be uncompromising, but that's about it. We're an obvious metamorphosis."

▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED: October 1976-August 1977
▶RELEASE DATE: October 27, 1977
▶PRODUCERS: Chris Thomas, Bill Price
▶STUDIO: Wessex Sound Studios **▶HIGHEST UK CHART POSITION:** 1 **▶TRACKLISTING:**
▶1. Holidays In The Sun ▶2. Liar ▶3. No Feelings ▶4. God Save the Queen ▶5. Problems ▶6. Seventeen ▶7. Anarchy In The UK ▶8. Bodies ▶9. Pretty Vacant ▶10. New York ▶11. EMI

FIVE FACTS

1 Pistols figurehead Sid Vicious was so inept at playing his instrument that manager Malcolm McLaren had to ask sacked bassist Glen Matlock to return. When he demanded to be paid beforehand, guitarist Steve Jones took over the bass parts. Sid plays only on 'Bodies'.

2 Noel Gallagher also worships the Pistols' debut: "I made 10 albums and in my mind they don't match up to that, and I'm an arrogant bastard. I'd give them all up to have written that, I truly would."

3 Nirvana's cultural impact is still often likened to the Sex Pistols. In 2002, veteran *Rolling Stone* journalist Charles M Young said: "'Never Mind The Bollocks' changed everything. There had never been anything like it before and there's never been anything quite like it since. The closest was probably Nirvana, a band very heavily influenced by the Sex Pistols."

4 On release, the LP was forced to compete in the charts with both a sneaky French pressing and the 'Spunk' bootleg album. It still sold 125,000 advance orders and topped the charts the week after.

5 John Lydon was unimpressed with the campaign to get 'God Save The Queen' to Number One for the 2012 Diamond Jubilee. "I don't like the vacuous nonsense of trying to create false agendas and pretending to want to be Number One. Never did nothing for Number One. Not in my entire life."

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Kurt's influences

The Sex Pistols

Punk's ringleaders were a huge influence on Kurt's musical mindset – Nirvana were even called 'the Sex Pistols of the '90s'. In 1977, in the wake of 'God Save The Queen', the Pistols were demonised by the UK press and banned from many British venues. NME's Charles Shaar Murray cornered them in Sweden to witness the carnage and chaos of the ultimate Brits Abroad...

The prosperous cyborgs at the next table in the backroom of this expensive Stockholm eating-place are sloshing down their coffee as fast as they possibly can. As they vacate the premises, another troupe are ushered in, take a look at the party in the corner and usher themselves out again.

Johnny Rotten – a discordant symphony of spiky crimson hair, grubby white tuxedo embellished with a giant paperclip on the lapel and an absolutely godawful black tie with orange polkadots – looks at the departing Swedish posteriors with no little disdain.

"It must've been my aftershave," he remarks in his fake-out voice, halfway between Kenneth Williams, Sweeney Todd and Peter Cook, and returns to his beefheart fillet.

In Stockholm, The Sex Pistols are a big deal. 'God Save The Queen' is in the Top Ten, just as it is in Norway, where they also have – for their pains – a monarchy. They've also been splattered all over the national press in Scandinavia just like over here; more so than any other visiting rock band, or so they tell me, anyway.

In general, though, Sweden has been less willing to take Johnny Rotten at his word and identify him with the Antichrist than the good ol' UK. They've stayed four nights in the same Stockholm hotel without any complaints from the management, despite Sid Vicious taking a leak in the corridor because two girls had locked themselves in the bathroom of his particular chamber. When the local equivalent of Teds (a bunch of kustom kar cruisers/*American Graffiti* freaks known as *raggare*) began harassing the Pistols' fans as they left the gig and, indeed, followed the band and their admirers back to – and into – the hotel, the police were right there for the protection of the people.

I even saw one Swedish copper at the back of the hall on the second gig doing a restrained but joyful pogo to the lilting strains of 'Pretty Vacant'. Can you imagine that at a British Pistols gig – in fact, can you imagine a British Pistols gig at all these days? In Britain, if the police were informed that The Sex Pistols and/or their fans were getting the shit whacked out of them somewhere, the most you could expect would be that they'd show up an hour or two later to count the bodies and bust the survivors (if there were any) for threatening behaviour. At home The Sex Pistols are public enemies. In Sweden, they're an important visiting Britpop group. So it goes...

Lemme tell you a little bit about Stockholm, just for context and perspective, before we get on to the good bits. They've got the highest standard of living in the world over there, with an average weekly wage of £120 and prices to match. A bottle of beer will set you back over a quid a throw, and by British standards it ain't even beer; more like a beer-flavoured soft drink that fills you up and leaves you belching and farting and urinating like an elephant and doesn't even get you pissed. We thought some kind of oasis had been discovered when we found a late-night café that served Guinness.

John Rotten – who is, after all, an Irisher by roots (the rest of the band call him "Paddy" sometimes) – was enchanted by this revelation until we discovered that it was a special Scanda variety of Guinness even though it's brewed up in Dublin, and therefore no stronger than the rest of their stuff.

We ordered up about 10 of the bloody things, swilled them down and discovered to our horror that we were all still sober, so we celebrated the fact by vamoosing without settling the bill. We'd got as far as the car of our self-appointed guide – a Chris Spedding lookalike who runs a punk boutique called Suicide and who calls himself "the only true punk in Sweden" – before a search party from the café catches up with us and hauls The Only True Punk away to face retribution.

NME
August 6, 1977

At this stage in proceedings, the Pistols are only three-quarters strong. Sid Vicious is in London, where he has to appear in court on charges of possessing an offensive weapon of the knifish variety and assaulting a police officer.

That leaves Rotten, Steve Jones, and Paul Cook. Steve Jones plays guitar. He's been playing the guitar for little more than a year and a half, which would indicate that he's going to be a monster player by the time he's been playing for a bit longer. The reason that he sounds far more professional and experienced than he actually is is that he sticks to what is simple and effective and – within the confines of a hard rock aesthetic – tasteful. He knows what constitutes a good guitar sound, his time and attack are impeccable, and he plays no self-indulgent bullshit whatsoever.

Steve Jones is the oldest of the Pistols at 22, and his stolid features and blocky physique make him, visually at least, the most atypical Pistol. On the first evening, he went out to dinner in a Normal Person costume of dark blue blazer, grey slacks and a neat shirt and tie; camouflage so effective that I nearly didn't recognise him when he passed me in the corridor. He's a friendly, relaxed, goodnatured geezer; could be anybody you know and like and drink with, could be you.

Paul Cook plays drums, and has done so for three years now. Like Jones, he plays with an ear for what sounds good, a straight-ahead high-powered no-bullshit approach to what he does and no distance at all between himself and his drums. Again, he's an ordinary guy in the best sense of the term; he was in at the roots of the band when a convocation of kids with heisted instruments were jamming around Shepherds Bush: no formal groups, just a bunch of people playing together.

The nucleus was Cook and Jones, Glen Matlock on bass and sundry additional guitarists including Mick Jones (now of The Clash), Brian James (now of The Damned) and Nick Kent (now of no fixed abode). The Pistols had their dark genesis when Jones, Matlock and Cook got together with Johnny Rotten under the Cupid auspices of Malcolm McLaren.

Since Glen Matlock got the push and was replaced by Rotten's old college (not 'university' – *college*) buddy and neo-bassist Sid Vicious, the Pistols have consisted of two factions: Cook/Jones and Rotten/Vicious. These factions are by no means opposed or unfriendly or at cross-purposes: it's just that Paul and Steve get up earlier and go to bed earlier (with all that implies): Paul and Steve hanging out together before Sid and John get up and Sid and John hanging out together after Paul and Steve have gone to bed. John and Sid are the public face of the Sex Pistols: Jagger and Richard to the other two's Watts and Wyman, even though it'd be highly misleading to assume that the creative chores are split that way as well. →

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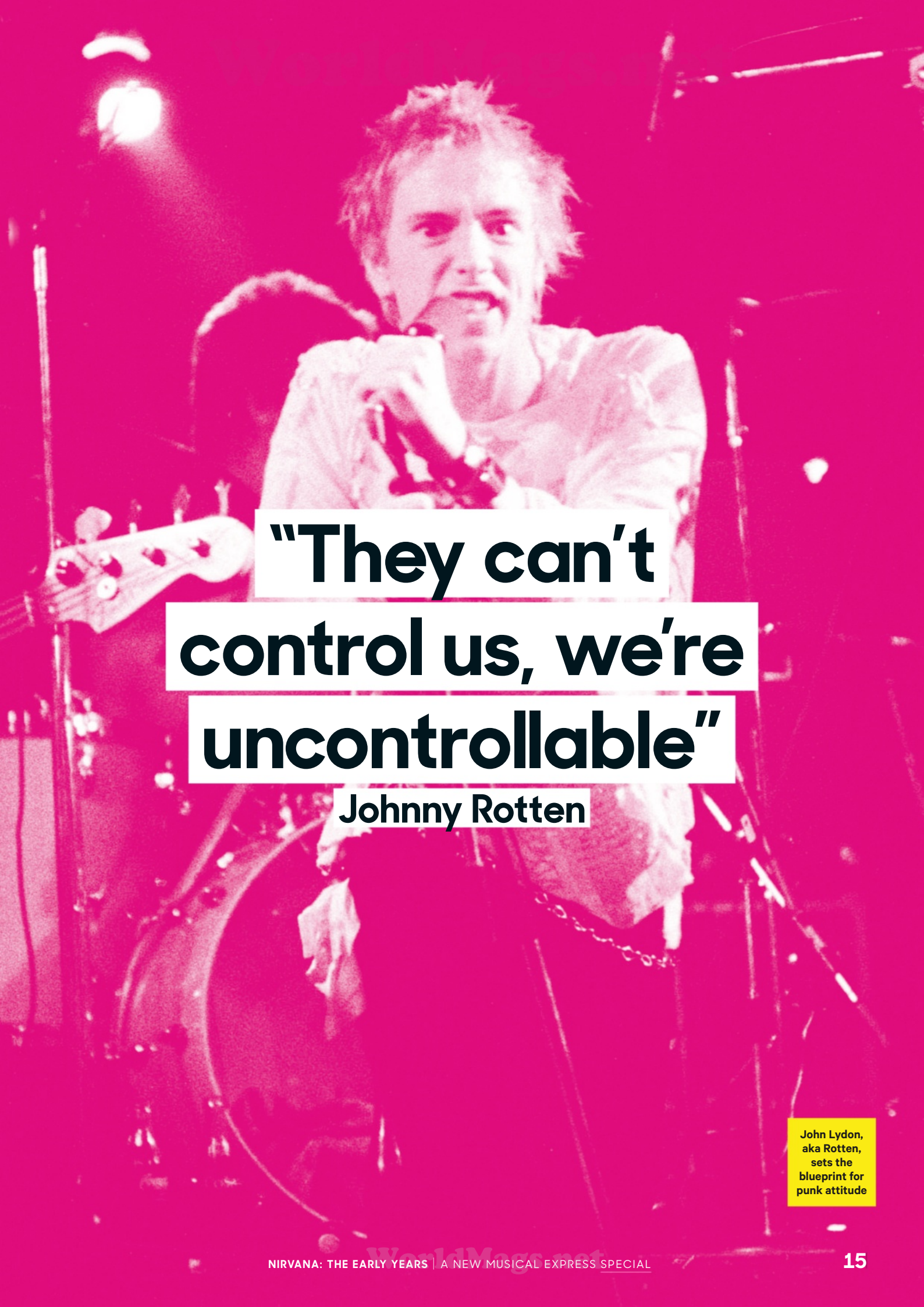

"They can't control us, we're uncontrollable"

Johnny Rotten

John Lydon, aka Rotten, sets the blueprint for punk attitude

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Anyway, that's as much background as we've time or need for, so zoom in on the Happy House, a Stockholm club run under the auspices of the local university's Student Union where we're a few minutes early for the sound check prior to the first of the band's two nights there. Sid Vicious has caused everybody a massive amount of relief by returning from London with the news that he beat the assault rap completely and copped a mere (?) £125 fine for the knife.

How'd you dress for court, Sid?

"Oh, I wore this real corny shirt my mum got me about five years ago and me steels. I must've looked a right stroppy cunt."

Oh yeah, we haven't really met Sid yet. He got the name 'Sid' when he was named after an allegedly really foul-looking albino hamster of that name that he and Rotten used to have.

"I hate the name Sid, it's a right poxy name, it's really vile. I stayed in for about two weeks because everyone kept calling me Sid, but they just wouldn't stop. Rotten started it. He's 'orrible like that, he's always picking on me..."

Rotten: "Sid's the philosopher of the band."

Vicious: "I'm an intellectual."

Rotten: "He's also an oaf. He listens to what everybody else says and thinks, 'How can I get in on this?'"

Vicious: "No I don't! I'm a highly original thinker, man, he's just jealous because I'm really the brains of the group. I've written all the songs, even right from the beginning when I wasn't even in the group. They was so useless they had to come to me because they couldn't think of anything by themselves..."

Outside, a youthful horde of Swedish punks decked out in fair facsimiles of Britpunk outfits are milling around looking up at the window behind which the band and their entourage are lurking. None of these kids are going to get in tonight, however, because Happy House gigs are mostly for over-23s only – a fact which causes bitter amusement because it means that the audience is, officially at least, all older than the band.

When the group make a break for it to go back to the hotel, it's Sid Vicious who stays out in the street listening to what people have to say and assuring them that the band are on their side. He's out there for more than five minutes before he's virtually pulled into the car.

"I don't think we should be playing for all them poxy student hippies. I reckon we should tell 'em that we don't play unless they let the kids in – either that or open up the back doors and let the kids in anyway." In the end, the kids have to wait until the following night when it's 15-and-over, but it's not a situation that the band are particularly happy with.

Rotten's behind the mic, staring out at the audience through gunmetal pupils, mouth tight, shoulders hunched, one hand clamped around the microphone.

"I'd like to apologise," he says harshly, "to all the people who couldn't get in. It wasn't our fault."

And the band kicks into 'Anarchy In The UK', Jones' guitar a saw-toothed snarl teetering on the edge of a feedback holocaust, Sid's bass synched firmly into Cook's walloping drums and Rotten an avenging scarecrow, an accusing outcast cawing doom and contempt like Poe's raven.

The Pistols flail on through 'I Wanna Be Me', 'I'm A Lazy Sod', 'EMI' (by far the best song so far written about a record company), 'God Save The Queen', 'Problems', 'No Feelings', 'Pretty Vacant', the encore of 'No Fun' and sundry others, and it's hard to see how anyone who digs rock'n'roll couldn't dig the Pistols; while they're onstage you couldn't conceive of anybody being better and John Rotten bestrides the rock'n'roll stage of the second half of the '70s the way David Bowie did the first half.

If the last few British rock'n'roll years have produced a superstar, Johnny Rotten is *it*. And let Fleet Street, the BBC and the rock establishment cope with that the best way they know how, because it isn't just happening, it's already happened. And if the definitive British rock band of now feel that they have to go to Europe or Scandinavia or even America just to be able to play in front of people, then there's something worse than anarchy in the UK right now.

"People like their safe world. They don't like realising the way things actually are" John Lydon

The following afternoon finds the Pistols' party signing autographs, hanging out, posing and nicking things at The Only True Punk In Sweden's boutique.

The verdict seems to be that everything there is pretty much like SEX was a year or so ago and, in keeping with the celebrated Swedish standard of living, everything is around twice the price that it would be in London. Swelling almost visibly with pride, Sweden's Only True Punk unveils with a flourish a deluxe leather jacket that he's ordered for Sid.

Vicious – charmingly clad in baggy pink pants, a floral blouse and sandals with a little pink bow in his immaculately spiky coiffure – takes one look at it and declares it poxy, vile, corny and twee. Sweden's Only True Punk looks deeply hurt. Over the other side of the shop, Rotten is trying on a pair of repulsive leopardskin-topped shoes.

"They're really horrible," he beams. "I must have them. I could start another absurd trend... like safety pins." The way that previous sartorial quirk of his had caught on with The Youth and become an industry virtually overnight is a source of vast amusement to him – as well it might be.

The previous night, the air had been thick with rumours that the *raggare* had eyes for trashing, and for the second gig – the one open to the teenage punk rockers – the talk is intensified.

The band's limo – shaddup at the back there! – and the attendant dronemobiles are waved through a police cordon and everyone's hustled through a back door mach schnell. "Get that poser inside!" snaps Rotten as Sweden's Only True Punk dawdles to make sure he's noticed in the exalted company.

The punkette audience tonight is a lot cooler and better behaved than the beer-chugging beardies who made up last night's crew, and the band feel a far greater kinship to the crowd. "It's our night tonight!" shouts Rotten as the band crash into 'Anarchy...' and tonight his contempt is not directed at the audience but – on their behalf – at a phantom enemy: the crowds of *raggare* who lurk outside the police cordons in their Dodges, Chevies and Cadillacs.

Next to me, a girl sits on her boyfriend's shoulders, oblivious to the little bubble of blood welling up around the safety-pin puncture in her cheek. After a while, she switches the safety pin to her other cheek so she can link it up with the chain in her earring. Pretty soon, that begins to bleed too. She doesn't care. Everybody – band, audience, even the cop at the back – is high as a kite and happy as can be. There's no violence and not a bad vibe in sight; everybody's getting off.

And this is the show that our guardians won't let us see?

The trouble comes after the audience leave; it ain't the Pistols' fault, and there's nothing at all that the Pistols can do about it. We're all upstairs drinking rats' piss when there's a commotion outside and someone reports that a bunch of *raggare* have just chased a couple of young girl fans and ripped the pins right through their faces to prove what big bad tough guys they are.

Sid wants to go out there and lay into them. Someone else suggests ramming them with the limousine like the cat in the South did to the Ku Klux Klan awhile back. Ultimately, there's nothing that can be done except call the fuzz and feel very, very sick about the whole thing.

So ultimately, why are the various establishments – governmental, media and even rock'n'roll – more frightened of the Pistols than of any other previous manifestation of rock'n'roll madness?

"Because they were all to some extent slightly controlled by the industry," says Rotten, ensconced with Vicious and Cook in the relative peace and quiet of the hotel room.

"There was always an element of the establishment behind it, but with us it's totally our own. We do what we want to do and there's no industry behind us. That's the difference. That's what frightens them."

"Or rather," interposes Vicious, "the industry is behind us rather than with us."

Hey, if the industry's behind you it's got a knife in its hand...

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Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungeon dressed for court, 1977

"Yeah," says Sid, "but we've got a Chieftain tank."

"They can't control us," continues Rotten. "We're uncontrollable. They've predicted all down the line against us, and they've failed. This scares them. They've never been able to do that before. They've always known before that the money would come into it, but they've missed the boat so many times. With us it used to be: 'They won't catch on because we're going to stop it.' There've been a hell of a lot of organisations out to stop us, and they've all failed."

Me, I don't think the Pistols can be stopped unless the kids are tired of them.

Cook: "I think it's gone beyond the point where people can be told. They wouldn't play 'God Save The Queen' but that went to the top of the charts, and that usually dictates what goes in."

"Been listening to The Clash, obviously," says Sid. "The Clash only wrote those songs in the first place 'cos of me and 'im (Rotten) moaning about living in a poxy flat in Hampstead. It was probably them coming up there and seeing the squalor that we were living in that encouraged them to write all that shit."

Squalour in Hampstead, the bastion of liberalism?

"Oh no," says Rotten. "You shoulda seen it."

Vicious: "It was liberal, all right. It didn't even have a bathtub."

The kids Rotten went to school with weren't really into music, "except the geezers I hung around with. It was in skinhead times and they couldn't understand how a skinhead could like The Velvet Underground. It was quite apt. I went to the Catholic School in Caledonian Road, opposite the prison. What a dungeon!"

Force-feeding you religion along with the lessons?

"Yeah, it was terrible. They really destroy you with what they do to your soul. They try and take away any kind of thought that might in any way be original. What they try to do is turn you out a robot."

Were any of the teachers halfway human?

"The ones that got sacked very quickly. Everything was taught in a very strict style, in the same way that they taught religion: this is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and if you don't like it, you're gonna get caned. But Catholic schools build rebels."

Many people like to feel that Malcolm McLaren is in total control of The Sex Pistols: Svengali to Rotten's Trilby. Maybe they feel happier thinking that Rotten's controlled by McLaren, than they do feeling that maybe he isn't controlled at all.

"They need to do that because they don't want to think differently than they already do. They like their safe world. They don't like realising the way things actually are."

Vicious: "The trouble is that the general public are so contrived themselves that they can't imagine how anybody else could *not* be contrived. Therefore, if you're not contrived, they have to find some way of justifying their own contrivance..."

Ghost voice-over from the past: Jack Nicholson in *Easy Rider* telling Fonda and Hopper: "They're not scared of you, they're scared of what you represent to them... what you represent to them is freedom... Oh yeah – they're gonna talk to you and talk to you and talk to you about individual freedom, but they see a free individual, it's gonna scare 'em."

REDFERNS, ALPHA

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"All you could hear was Kurt Cobain's voice screaming through the house! It was wild..."

pretty

Before Nirvana there was Fecal Matter, the scatological genesis of Kurt Cobain's tortured genius. Barry Nicolson delves into the filth to dig out the gold

In December 1985, Mari Earl agreed to let her nephew – her sister's kid, an 18-year-old punk rocker, high-school dropout and sometime vagrant who, as a musician herself, she'd always had a soft spot for – use her home in suburban Burien, Washington to record a demo with his new band. It wasn't the first time Kurt Cobain had used his aunt's house as a recording studio. Four years earlier, he'd recorded a number of songs there under the name Organised Confusion, using wooden spoons and a suitcase for percussion instead of Earl's drum machine because he wanted his music to be 'pure'. That session – full of distorted guitars, heavy bass and "occasional bloodcurdling screams" – had been noisy. This one, lasting two days, took the biscuit.

"They set up in my music room and they'd just crank it up!" Earl later remembered. "It was loud. They would put down the music tracks first, then he'd put the headphones on and all you could hear was Kurt Cobain's voice screaming through the house! It was pretty wild. My husband and I, we'd just look at each other and smile and go, 'You think we should close the window so the neighbours don't hear? So they don't think we're beating him or something?'"

What the neighbours would have heard was Fecal Matter, Kurt Cobain's first real band, who, despite their fleeting existence, have gone on to attain near-mythical

status among Nirvana fans. The racket they committed to tape over the course of those two days – a demo album titled 'Illiteracy Will Prevail' – became the holy grail for Cobain completists: after details of the album were mentioned in Michael Azerrad's 1993 biography *Come As You Are*, fake versions of the songs were widely circulated from 1997 onwards but the real things didn't start trickling out until 2005. Further tracks appeared in 2006 and 2007, though some have been mislabelled and others are incomplete.

At the time of the recording, Fecal Matter was comprised only of Kurt and Melvins' Dale Crover (by that point, the pair had ditched their original drummer, Greg Hokanson), but fellow Melvins Mike Dillard and Buzz Osborne later joined the group, albeit briefly. There is, however, some confusion as to the group's live history. Cobain biographer Charles R Cross states that the band fizzled out before playing a single gig; others maintain that the original lineup – Cobain on guitar and vocals, Crover on bass and Hokanson on drums – managed one show in December 1985, supporting Melvins at the Spot Tavern in Moclips, a remote beach resort on the Pacific Coast. In any case, Fecal Matter came to an ignominious end sometime in mid-1986: according to Buzz Osborne, "Kurt got disgusted with it because I wouldn't buy a bass system and so he said that I wasn't dedicated enough."

This was a fate met by most of Kurt Cobain's early bands, which tended to be short-lived and largely undocumented. They exist only as footnotes in a larger story: there's The Sellouts, the Creedence Clearwater Revival covers band that disbanded when he physically attacked the bassist; Brown Towel, who – thanks to a misspelled poster for one of their (very) few gigs – have gone down in history as 'Brown Cow'; The Stiff Woodies, a Melvins side-project he was briefly involved in, and a few others (Skid Row, Throat Oysters, Ted Ed Fred, etc) that were early Nirvana lineups in all but name. Fecal Matter, though, are more significant. For one thing, the 'Illiteracy Will Prevail' tape was what convinced Krist Novoselic of Cobain's talent, and it marks the first-known appearance of a couple of tracks ('Spank Thru' and 'Downer') that would later be recorded by Nirvana. For another, unlike his subsequent bands, Fecal Matter's recordings have survived, and people can actually listen to and analyse them for themselves. Most importantly – and to use an obvious metaphor – Fecal Matter were the fertiliser that Nirvana would sprout from, and 'Illiteracy Will Prevail' provides a musical document – crude though it may be – of Kurt Cobain's adolescent concerns and his development as a songwriter.

"His lyrics were rebellious slams against society"

Mari Earl, Kurt's aunt

Cobain's teenage years had been restless and rudderless: after quitting high school when he learned he wouldn't have enough credits to graduate, his mother threw him out of the house when he failed to find employment. From then on, he would sleep on friends' couches, in the back of vans and sometimes – according to legend – under one of the bridges on the Wishkah river. Whenever he did get a job, they were low-paying and never lasted: he would often just stop showing up rather than formally quit. While staying with the family of a particularly devout friend, he became a born-again Christian, only to renounce his faith soon thereafter. At one point, he was on the verge of joining the navy, passing the aptitude test before reconsidering the decision at the last minute.

Though Fecal Matter's lyrics address none of those experiences directly, they are very obviously the work of someone who was aware of his place on periphery of society, and who felt aggrieved and indignant about it. "Rebellious and angry," was how Earl remembered his lyrics. "Mostly slams against society in general. Kurt didn't like the social ladder in school – kids thinking they were cool because they wore the 'right' clothes or were handsome or pretty. His songs back then reflected his opinions about these things."

That's certainly evident on 'Class of '86' (also known as 'Buffy's Pregnant'), in which Cobain inhabits the dual roles of drunken, misogynistic jock and vacuous, gossiping cheerleader – presumably the sort of people he knew well from his time at Aberdeen High School – and sneers about how "*Me and my breakdancing friends went out and beat up some punk rock faggots*". 'Spank Thru' is a delightfully puerile ode to masturbation, while 'Bambi Slaughter' finds him "*Raiding grandma's garage, selling personal possessions for bucks*" and 'Vaseline' makes brief mention of his troubles with the law (he was an infrequent visitor to the cells, usually on small-fry charges of trespassing and vandalism). One song that they did not record (and which is often mistakenly thought to be an early version of 'Anorexorcist') was 'Suicide Samurai', but Earl managed to glimpse the lyrics her nephew had written in his notebook and what she saw left her "with an impression

that he had possibly tried suicide before".

Arguably the most fascinating – not to mention disturbing – track is 'Laminated Effect', a boy-meets-girl tale where the girl is a lesbian, "*never fond of the shaft*", who finds herself 'cured' through having sex with the boy, a gay AIDS-sufferer who was raped by his father as a child. The song ends on the refrain "*Made not born, made not born*", and even if you chalk it up to a youthful faux pas, it's hard to reconcile the sentiment with its author, a man who later claimed to be "gay in spirit". (The Nirvana blogger Nicholas Soulsby has speculated that 'Laminated Effect' may be about Cobain's uncle Patrick, who was indeed gay, suffered from AIDS, and claimed to have been raped by his uncle Delbert as a child).

The ugliness and emotional viscera of the lyrics are matched by the music they accompany: the guitars (recorded directly into a tape machine, in true DIY fashion) are sludgy and heavily distorted, and are complemented by Crover's proudly amateurish drumming and Cobain's guttural howls. Amidst the noise and confusion, however, there are moments of songcraft and melodic ingenuity that stand out (particularly on the higher-quality remasters bootleggers have taken it upon themselves to produce), and Cobain – or 'Kurdt Kobain', as he was credited – was immensely proud of it. To him, the album's very existence was tangible proof of his abilities as a musician, and while there's no denying its rough and rudimentary nature, you can hear why, after being passed a copy some months later, Krist Novoselic was impressed enough to agree to start a band with him. Indeed, Cobain handed out copies of the cassette (complete with a hand-drawn cover of flies buzzing around a turd) to numerous friends and acquaintances in Aberdeen, many of whom probably now regret losing or taping over it: while incomplete bootleg versions are doing the rounds, a genuine copy of the tape would now be worth thousands of dollars – the very definition of turning shit into gol d.

Today, despite their own brief and confusing history (just as the extent of their gigography is disputed, some people now believe 'Illiteracy Will Prevail' was recorded at Easter 1986, not in December 1985) Fecal Matter exist as a crucial part of Nirvana's. The tape itself is fascinating, though less for the songs contained therein than what they reveal about their 18-year-old author. If making sense of Cobain's inner life sometimes seems akin to putting together an incomplete jigsaw, 'Illiteracy Will Prevail' is at least one of its dog-eared corner-pieces. ■

Fecal Matter: the choice nuggets

SOUND OF DENTAGE
One of the most Nirvana-esque songs on the demo – and also one of the most fully-realised – 'Sound Of Dentage' is built around a guttural, goblinesque vocal and a simple but deceptively catchy chorus.

BAMBI SLAUGHTER
Opening on a post-punk groove that could almost be described as danceable, this soon morphs into an exercise in brutal stop-start metal riffing, one which bears a (very) slight resemblance to 'Milk It'.

LAMINATED EFFECT
A two-minute punk-rock thrash whose graphic lyrics about rape, AIDS and homosexuality – including heterosexual sex being described as "*normal*" and a repeated line suggesting gay people were "*made, not born*" – have ensured it occupies a contentious spot in Nirvana lore.

CLASS OF '86
A sneering takedown of Kurt's high-school graduating class, more notable for its dark, vitriolic humour than any melodic finesse.

SPANK THRU
The only song from the tape to have had an official release (on 2005's 'Sliver: The Best Of The Box'), this version is musically and lyrically identical to the one that appeared on 1988's 'Sub Pop 200' compilation, albeit in a much rougher form.

DOWNER
Another track that would eventually be recorded by Nirvana (making its way onto 'Incesticide' and later reissues of 'Bleach'), 'Downer' appears here in slightly incomplete form, with the chorus intact, but missing the verse.

VASELINE/BLATHER'S LOG
Starts off as a disjointed mess, but is redeemed by a ferocious riff straight out of the Black Sabbath playbook.

BOATAKK
One of the poorest recordings on an already pretty-poorly-recorded demo, even the cleaned-up versions of this track are difficult to make sense of. There's no mistaking how much fun Kurt's having screaming his larynx off, however.

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The Road To 'Bleach'

After Fecal Matter came Skid Row, then Pen Cap Chew, and finally Nirvana. Mark Beaumont traces the journey from the basement to 'Bleach'...

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The first pro photo-shoot for the lineup featuring Chad Channing, 1988

When the Byrds-y power pop had run its course, they popped the tape out of the dusty cassette deck, flipped it over, and prepared for the death-metal onslaught. Whoever had made that C90 tape must've been one sick, messed-up fuck. On one side, an album by The Smithereens, all '60s-tinted pop indebted to The Beatles, The Who, Elvis Costello and The Move. On the other, forty-five minutes of black-metal screaming and the wishing of painful death on loved ones from Celtic Frost, avant-garde hardcore doom-mongers from Switzerland. How the hell these two records didn't chase each other off the same tape was a mystery, but this demonic double-sider somehow ended up being the on-the-road soundtrack of choice in the Nirvana van.

And, somewhere between turnpikes, the unthinkable combination of these two records rubbed off.

1988, and Kurt Cobain's rock dream was finally off the ground. Fecal Matter had disintegrated, but the demo tape had done its job. Back around 1985 he'd met a tall, charismatic bassist while hanging out in Melvins' rehearsal space, a guy by the name of Krist Novoselic. Melvins' Buzz Osborne had introduced them but they already had hidden links; they'd attended Aberdeen High School at the same time but never connected there. The two instantly hit it off – they were both big fans of the US punk and hardcore scene, both into Black Sabbath and Black Flag, and they both felt dislocated →

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from their working-class backgrounds. They practised together for a while, in a room above Novoselic's mother's hairdressing salon. Realising he'd found a rare musical soulmate, Cobain harboured intentions of playing with Novoselic for some time until, in 1986, with his Fecal Matter project falling apart, he gave him a copy of the demo tape, suggesting they form a band. It took months of Kurt hassling Krist before he listened to it and fell in love with 'Spank Thru'.

"I wanted a band name that was beautiful"

Kurt Cobain

By the time Novoselic came around it was 1987 and a buzz was in the air in Washington State. Aberdeen hardcore heroes Melvins had got their first album 'Gluey Porch Treatments' out via Alchemy Records, and it seemed like Seattle was starting to move. Sensing zeitgeist, the pair hooked up with a drummer called Bob McFadden, but rehearsals fell apart after a month. Undaunted, Kurt and Krist found a new drummer by the name of Aaron Burckhard and set about brushing up the Fecal Matter songs for the stage. They started out playing shows at parties at Evergreen State College, a liberal school in Olympia, and for these they needed a name. Skid Row was the first suggestion, but another band had started with that name just the year before. Pen Cap Chew, Bliss and Ted Ed Fred were briefly in the running, threatening a cheesier outlook on the coming decades of alternative rock, until the band eventually plumped for Nirvana. "I wanted a name that was kind of beautiful or nice and pretty instead of a mean, raunchy punk name like the Angry Samoans," Kurt would tell *Rolling Stone*.

In those formative months, under those various alternative monikers, the band gradually ditched the Fecal Matter songs in favour of writing new ones. They swiftly built a formidable canon – a home-made demo recorded at an Evergreen State College live show in April 1987 included 'Floyd The Barber', 'Downer' and 'Love Buzz' alongside ragged new songs called 'Mexican Seafood' and 'Hairspray Queen'. Then Kurt and Krist moved out of Aberdeen to Olympia and Tacoma respectively and lost touch with Burckhard. Instead they switched to working with Dale Crover from Melvins, with whom Cobain insisted they practice intently in preparation for their first demo recording session in January. Since he and Krist were virtually broke, he'd saved hard to stump up the couple of hundred dollars it would take to make his first studio recordings to send to labels he admired – SST, Touch And Go – and he wasn't going to see the time wasted. He paid for six hours of studio time and Nirvana had to get as many songs down as they possibly could; the short time was all they could afford and, anyway, they had a gig to play in Tacoma that night.

Focused but excited, on noon on January 23, 1988, the band unloaded their cheap, beat-up equipment at Seattle's Reciprocal Studios – a Univox guitar for Kurt, Dale's Randall amp and Krist's huge bass cab with one wheel missing. Producer Jack Endino – who'd go on to oversee all of the sessions for the band's debut album – recalls Kurt, on his first ever visit to a recording studio, being nervous but professional. "They didn't screw around in the studio, they just wanted to get it done," he told the BBC.

Early days: (l-r) Kurt Cobain, Chad Channing, Krist Novoselic

FOOTNOTE 1
Founded in 1967, Evergreen is an experimental institution with a hippy-era ethos: its motto, Omnia Extares, is Latin for 'Let it all hang out'. A cultural hub for grunge and riot grrl, its alumni include Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna and Sleater-Kinney's Carrie Brownstein.

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ALICE WHEELER/RETNA, JAN TILTON/RETNA, ALICE WHEELER/RETNA, JAN TILTON/RETNA

"I mean, you don't record and mix 10 songs in one afternoon unless you are very, very focused and they were *very* focused. Most of the music was done in one take. So that in itself impressed me enough."

The schedule for the day was breakneck. Each song had one run-through then went down first time, on eight-track, with all of the songs recorded in the first three hours. Of the 12 songs Cobain had ready to go, they got 10 down; the last song of the day, 'Pen Cap Chew', was cut off mid-way though when the tape ran out and the band couldn't afford the extra $30 for another roll. By six o'clock, with the whole band crammed into a control room barely big enough for two, Endino had put together a rough mix and charged them $152.44 – only five hours of studio time, plus tape costs – and the band jumped in the van, headed for Tacoma. The Smithereens on the tape deck, then Celtic Frost. Cradling the tape of his 10 songs finally realised, in Cobain's head the two sounds began to merge.

Back at Reciprocal, Endino just couldn't let the session lie. He'd been so impressed by the "arresting" passion and power in Cobain's voice that he stayed late and put together a second mix of the tape just for himself. So, as Kurt sent his copy of the demos out to their favoured labels, Endino slipped it quietly to his friends at the nascent Sub Pop label.

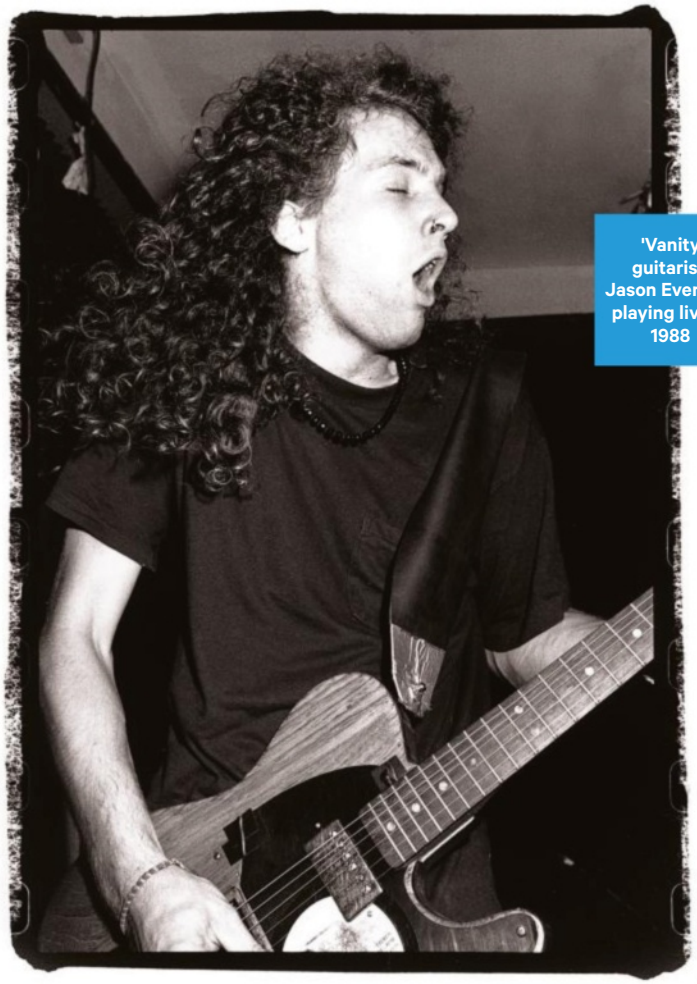
Hence, Nirvana returned to Reciprocal on June 11 and 30, now signed to the coolest label in the country, busy crystallising their unique sonic mash-up of Mudhoney, Melvins, Sex Pistols, Sabbath, The Smithereens and Celtic Frost and boasting a cool new drummer. Shortly after the January sessions, Crover had relocated to San Francisco, leaving the band and recommending Dave Foster to replace him. Foster lasted just a few months in the band – as he lived several hours' drive away back in Aberdeen, rehearsing with him was inconvenient verging on impossible since Kurt or Krist would have to go pick him up, and differences in his cultural background made those long drives seem even longer. Foster was ousted without notification when he landed up in jail for two weeks for assaulting the son of the mayor of Cosmopolis, Washington.

After another brief spell with Burckhard on drums, which ended when Aaron was too hungover to show up for practice one day, the band went on the hunt for a reliable drummer. Newspaper ads failed them, but a friend put them on to Chad Channing, drummer with Tick-Dolly-Row, and a few jams with Krist and Kurt unofficially secured his seat in May. That June the three-piece recorded the most accessible and poppy chunks of the material that would make up 'Bleach' – their debut single 'Love Buzz', a cover of Dutch rock band Shocking Blue's hit from 1969, and 'About A Girl'. But they were still short of the cash needed to complete their debut album. And for that they'd need to court a vanity guitarist.

FOOTNOTE 2
Everman's guitar contributions can be heard on live bootleg 'Trust No One', a recording of a Boston show where Kurt, having broken his arm, left all guitar duties to Everman. After being kicked out of Nirvana, he spent a only-slightly-longer stint as bassist of Soundgarden, appearing on one Beatles cover ('Come Together').

Jason Everman, a guitar player from Alaska via Poulsbo in Washington, wasn't a strictly necessary addition to their line-up, but he had ready cash and wanted to spend it on Nirvana. Even using the demo versions of 'Floyd The Barber' and 'Paper Cuts' that Crover played on back in January, plus 'Love Buzz' and 'About A Girl' from the June sessions, Nirvana needed another six days in Reciprocal to complete the record and, despite working during holiday days – Christmas Eve and over New Year – it was going to cost another $606.17. Everman covered the costs and as a result, despite not playing a note on 'Bleach', received a credit as second guitarist.

The finished 'Bleach' sounded exactly what it was; the rough, raw, unpolished garage punk warm-up of a talent soon to go supernova. Yet this record, so rushed and DIY in its formulation, stood head and shoulder above similar lo-fi hardcore scene debuts thanks to its shameless pop nous, shining through in a scene where 'melody' was as dirty a word as 'Geffen'. Thanks, The Smithereens... ■



'Vanity guitarist' Jason Everman playing live in 1988

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Fearless in Seattle

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Melody Maker
March 18, 1989

Seattle

In 1989, Melody Maker's Everett True was among the first to pick up on the grunge scene thriving in Seattle. Here, his first report from Grunge City unveils the classic Sub Pop roster...

You'll find Seattle in the far north-west corner of America, cut off from anywhere by 2,000 miles of badlands, cornfields and the Wild West. In the city's heart lies the Terminal Sales Building on First Avenue. At the very top are the offices of Sub Pop, life-force to the most vibrant, kicking music scene encompassed in one city for at least 10 years. Names such as Mudhoney, Nirvana and Blood Circus abound, trampling gleefully over the grave of punk rock and heavy metal, digging up any old spectre they can find and spitting on the daisies. Seattle, birthplace of Jimi Hendrix and Sonic Youth, once more equates with the old-fashioned sentiment ROCK'N'ROLL!

Run by two local music fanatics, Jonathan Poneman and Bruce Pavitt, Sub Pop has been content to play a steady waiting game up to now, merely releasing a wide variety of limited-edition albums and seven-inch singles. But the continued championing of Green River (and later, Mudhoney) by Sonic Youth (culminating in the recent Sonic Youth/Mudhoney 12-inch collaboration 'Touch Me I'm Sick'), and John Peel's love for 'Sub Pop 200', a three-album collection of the Seattle sound, has changed all that.

Two of Sub Pop's bands, Mother Love Bone (ex-Green River) and Soundgarden, have signed major record deals and a distribution deal has been set up in Germany. Sub Pop releases will shortly be available over here via Tupelo. Mudhoney are touring Britain supporting Sonic Youth even as we speak. A Tad/Pussy Galore single is in the pipeline. Tours for Nirvana and Swallow are set. No longer isolated, Seattle suddenly finds itself thrust to the forefront of the rock world.

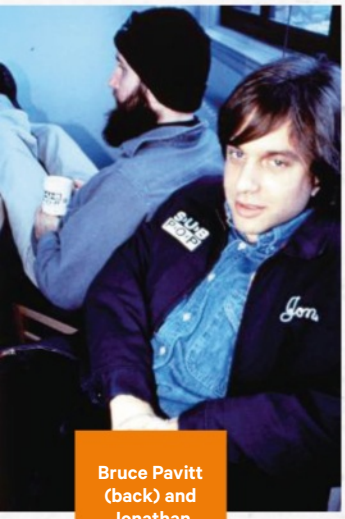
"My philosophy of Sub Pop is this," Bruce Pavitt explains. "I worked at Muzak for three years with a lot of these guys. It was a classic

→

corporate set-up. It started off by being easygoing, but soon, like most businesses, it was curtailing our freedom of expression... Sub Pop is a business set up to encourage freedom of thought."

Bruce and John's relationship with the bands on the label is based on a feeling of conspiracy and humour. They hang out together, drink beer and criticise one another. It's a chaotic, creative environment. Sub Pop is more a school than a record label, and that's where its strength lies.

"As far as A&R goes," Jonathan states. "You go to see one of your friend's bands and you think, 'Yeah, that sounds cool'. It's only occasionally that we go out on a limb. I did with Nirvana."



Bruce Pavitt (back) and Jonathan Poneman

A criticism which could be levelled at the Sub Pop roster of bands is that they're retrogressive, re-treading the well-worn paths of spiritual fathers such as Blue Cheer, Black Sabbath, The Sonics and 13th Floor Elevators.

But to me, there's nothing regressive about the emotional impact or sheer physicality and sexiness of these bands.

"There isn't so much a Sub Pop sound," Jonathan explains, "as a readily recognisable movement happening in the American north-west right now which is heavy, confrontational guitar-based rock. It's amazing that even in the late '80s there are still guitar bands that can flip people out. It's not a sound we're necessarily trying to thrust upon the rest of the world, we're more interested in documenting it."

Beat Happening

From Olympia, Washington, Beat Happening are the greatest rock'n'roll band in the world (with the exception, maybe, of Half Japanese). A beguiling mixture of the innocent and dangerously sexual. Cramps meet Marine Girls meet Jonathan Richman meets Screaming Trees and are run over by a tractor. Singer Calvin used to run Sub Pop with Bruce when it was a cassette fanzine, and now runs the brilliantly erratic K label. Minimalist voodoo chunka-chunka rock.

The Nights And Days

One of the great north-west American bands who play in the traditional north-western mould from the line of the Sonics and The Wailers. Very mod-influenced. A great dance band, no more, no less, who play a mean 'Diddy Wah Diddy'. Sub Pop may be co-releasing their new 12-inch through Regal Select.

Blood Circus

Complete and utter white trash, Blood Circus are the closest Seattle get to Australian feeding time. Motörhead meet the Wipers; minimalist grunge metal. Oodles of hair. Blood Circus look early '70s, have the drive of early '80s and lie strictly within the region of blues-based raw heavy rockers. As San Francisco's *Puncture* magazine puts it: "How do you feel when you're six feet underground? Low down and dirty."

Green River

Seminal Seattle rock metal band fronted by Mark Arm (now of Mudhoney). Split to become Mudhoney and Mother Love Bone. As heavy, loud, basic and shit-kicking as they make 'em. The Sonics, Black Sabbath and Black Flag all rolled into one squirming mess. 'Hangin' Tree' on 'Sub Pop 200' was the tour de force of their live performances.

"At the time of 'Come On Down' [the first Green River EP]," reveals Mark Arm, "all the basslines consisted of Steve Harris triplets – 'here come the horses over the hill'. Steve [Turner, guitarist with Mudhoney] hated that stuff. We were writing songs with too many different parts. I didn't think about it back then, I was blowing myself away by being in a junior Rush, or whatever. Steve left right at the peak of that. Then we concentrated on writing simpler songs and things got a lot better and people started liking us.

"So some of the other members started getting the idea that they could be popular, and began to think, 'Well, I'm getting to be 24, what am I going to be doing the rest of my life?' So Green River got into the idea of signing to a major, and that's how 'Rehab Doll' was recorded, with that idea in mind. But for me, too many compromises were made. I was listening to far simpler stuff, such as basic Stooges. In the end we split up on Halloween. I formed Mudhoney and the others became Mother Love Bone and signed to Polygram. So I guess we both got what we wanted."

Fastbacks

Have existed in various incarnations for around seven years. The pre-Fastbacks Fastbacks originally included the bassist from Guns N' Roses. A seminal Seattle punk rock band with a distinctive, melodic style, their Green River cover on 'Sub Pop 200' was recorded as a fun thing to do.

Screaming Trees

From Ellensburg in the middle of Washington State where there is literally nothing to do, except go to college. On SST, they formed before Sub Pop fully existed. Psychedelic pop rock, only far, far more. Fat men's acid blues. Two overweight brothers make up the bulk of the group. Their new album, 'Buzz Factory', is out soon on Reciprocal.

Mudhoney

Raging primal grunginess. Ultimate gnarly, gristly, gory, grossly grainy, grimy garage group who have shot to the forefront of British music media attention with their six-track thigh-busting EP, 'Superfuzz Bigmuff', and the Sonic Youth cover of their grunge classic 'Touch Me I'm Sick'. Watch out for these boys live.

"The line 'Touch Me I'm Sick' is about when you see people who're sick, who have cancer or something, which isn't even contagious, but you still automatically stand back a little," says Mark Arm. "I thought it up one day and thought it was real funny. One critic said it was an indictment of our audience, like they're afraid of me. Huh?!"

"'Here Comes Sickness', from the new album, is almost a holdover from Green River days. Like, you know, the kind of girl who's cute and will fuck anybody? It's like, you wanna touch but you know you should stay away. It's a euphemism for that kind of girl – like, sickness, go away, ugh!"

The Fluid

From Denver, Colorado. Not totally original, but thoroughly classic. It's the attitude which counts. One part Hüsker Dü, one part MC5, one part Iggy & The Stooges and one part Steppenwolf. Painted face, painted names. The Fluid have an exquisite American feel about them, very aggressive. Real danceable. Jonathan Poneman of Sub Pop explains their appeal: "There's a lot of music you'll listen to for a while until you reach saturation point and put it away. Five years later you put the needle back on the record and fall in love with it all over again. Whenever I see The Fluid I have that same kind of experience."

COURTESY OF SUB POP RECORDS

Nirvana

Basically, this is the real thing. No rock star contrivance, no intellectual perspective, no master plan for world domination. You're talking about four guys in their early twenties from rural Washington who wanna rock, who, if they weren't doing this, would be working in a supermarket or a lumber yard, or fixing cars. Kurdt Kobain is a great tunesmith, although still a relatively young songwriter. He wields a riff with passion. Nirvana deal a lot with Calvin Johnson (Beat Happening)-type themes – innocence and the repression of innocence. Nirvana songs treat the banal and the pedestrian with a unique slant.

"We grew up in Aberdeen. It was real scary; redneck, helltown, backwoods, like a village or a big city for lumberjacks," says bassist Chris Novoselic. "You see Jack Nicholson in *Easy Rider* talking about the rednecks? About how if they see something different they don't go running scared, they get dangerous. Aberdeen's like that. But they were so bone-headed, why shouldn't we be different from them?"

Tad

A mountain of sound. The heaviest man in all creation. The rockiest, gnarliest dude you'd ever want to wake up next to. Totally crushing. An enormous talent. From the backwoods of Idaho and trained as a butcher. When you watch Tad live you get the feeling someone's just turned a tap on, and suddenly you're being deluged with all the rage and frustration and anger and hurt of 1,000 dead-end lives. Tad makes early Swans seem half-hearted. "There's a certain frequency, 27 hertz or something, which'll make people shit their pants," say the band. "We're still searching for that frequency. Our guitar almost does it, it *kinda* does it, so people shit their pants in their heads. Everybody thinks everybody's sick when it happens and everybody's really embarrassed when it happens, so at our shows everybody's running to the bathroom at the same time."

Terry Lee Hale

Hails from Texas, but has moved all over America. Instrumental in helping organise the Seattle scene through backing live venues, obtaining gigs for local bands and so on. A man with a point of view which is bitter and sentimental at the same time. Primarily a solo guitarist. His direct, Holden Cauldfield-type folk songs are very American.

Girl Trouble

Generic garage/trash four-piece who are *something apart*. Ouija buzzsaw guitars, trainspotter crash-thrash mentality, and an indigenous outlook which lifts them above 99 per cent of Cramps re-run copyists. They hail from Tacoma, Washington, an industrial city and have their own magazine called *Wig Out!* The album, 'Hit It Or Quit It', is a Sub Pop co-release with Olympia's K label.

Steve Fisk

Producer, soundsmith, technician. The Adrian Sherwood of North-West America. Plays, produces, samples and generally fucks about with sound. Steve Fisk gives new definition to big hair. A big talent in a small country. The cattle country Tackhead.

The Walkabouts

Soon to release a new album 'Cataract'. They don't use a heavy guitar sound, instead having well-crafted, almost folk-influenced songs. Long-term Seattle favourites The Walkabouts started off as three brothers and a girlfriend playing college (Velvets) radio rock. Although they've been linked with names like The Go-Betweens and Throwing Muses, The Walkabouts have a finely honed identity of their own. Their track 'Got No Chains', is one of the finest moments of 'Sub Pop 200'.

Chemistry Set

Any scene is composed of a load of sub-groups, Seattle being no exception. Chemistry Set came out of the whole psychedelic/pop happening of three-to-four years ago. Like most bands connected with Sub Pop, they are nice people, drink a lot of beer and are friends with Jon and Bruce. Acid rock for beer casualties (or is it the other way round?).

Cat Butt

A bunch of south-westerners, Cat Butt play a mutated Texas psychedelic blues rock. Cat Butt are out of control. Every town they visited while touring with Mudhoney, they absolutely destroyed. If they weren't in a band, they'd be criminals, in the armed forces or dead.

The Thrown Ups

Greatest non-band in the world. They never practice or write songs. They get real drunk and laugh a lot. With two members of Mudhoney in the band, The Thrown Ups are a big influence on the attitudes of the Seattle scene.

"Me and Mark are in this other band called The Thrown Ups," says Steve Turner of Mudhoney. "The Thrown Ups are pretty much a fuck band – we don't practice or anything, when we play shows we make songs up on the spot, and our singles are made in the studio. They're a real inspiration for Mudhoney in terms of outlook. I couldn't think of a band who says fuck you more to the whole world."

Soundgarden

The new Led Zep. Now signed to A&M, they'll be touring Britain in May. When Soundgarden started at the beginning of Sub Pop, they were a lot rawer and more menacing than they are now. A happy wedding between metal and college radio music (anything between Pere Ubu, Richard Hell and the Velvets). Sophisticated. Based in Seattle since 1984.

Steven J Bernstein

One part Captain Beefheart, one part William Burroughs, one part village idiot, with a little Bukowski. A real sharp idiot savant in constant struggle with authority, Jesse is one of the few live poets who can make thrash-happy Seattle audiences stand up and listen. If you buy his published work then you're sicker than him. His track was recorded on a budget of two dollars.

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Bleach Reassesse

After 20-odd years in the shadow of later giants, Ben Hewitt finally gives 'Bleach' the appraisal it's always deserved...

Six months after the release of 'Bleach', Nirvana put out the 'Blew' EP: a four-track collection featuring two songs from their debut album and the unreleased tracks 'Stain' and 'Been A Son'. On the latter, Kurt Cobain took a waspish swipe at his father's apathy towards Kurt's sister Kim because, the singer claimed, his pops was perpetually disappointed he'd been lumbered with a baby girl rather than a second son.

'Bleach' isn't Nirvana's unwanted child, but it still has to fight damn hard for elbow room in their legacy. Between the world-changing 'Nevermind', the harrowingly raw 'In Utero' and the swansong vulnerability of 'MTV Unplugged', there's scant room in the legend for a debut LP that was still too indebted to Seattle's murky grunge sound to be deemed a bona-fide classic. It didn't change pop culture forever, but instead only sold 40,000 copies in the US until the release of 'Nevermind'. Rather than exploring a rock star's struggles with fame, pressure, self-loathing and drug addiction, it was the voice of a grouchy slacker.

Yet 'Bleach' is far too important to be cast aside as the runt of the litter – because here, for all the flaws and foibles, were the first flickering signs that Nirvana would become something special. 'School' looms into life on a wave of murky feedback and then erupts in a rudimentary, yet blistering riff: sonically and lyrically it's as simple as they come, but there's something about that scabrous bellyaching that perfectly sums up a desire to kick against the pricks and their bitchy, adolescent cliques.

Likewise, the helter-skelter racket of 'Mr Moustache' takes aim at dim-witted alpha males and their macho posturing as Kurt yelps witheringly: "*Yes I eat cow/I am not proud*." Later, he'd claim that he wrote all of the album's lyrics in one evening and they didn't carry any great weight of meaning, but he was already capable of vocalising how it felt to be discontent and disenchanted. 'Bleach' married scratchy, irascible noise to the most adolescent of concerns – school, bullies and, on 'Scoff' as on 'Been A Son', parental strife – and made them feel like the most important issues in the world. As Nirvana grew in stature, so Cobain's bugbears became more complex, too, but he'd never lose the knack for lending a voice to everyone who was similarly pissed off, for understanding his audience in a way that Axl Rose and Eddie Vedder never could.

And if 'In Utero' is often hailed as the purist's Nirvana album with its bleak, unvarnished sound, it's worth remembering that it was *purposefully* abrasive, a discontented troublemaker thumbing its nose at everyone who now wanted a piece of it. 'Bleach' is violently raw because it couldn't be anything else: recorded for just $600 and in 30 hours, there's no play-acting in the rough, guttural 'Negative Creep' or the narky thrash of 'Blew'. Even the lead single 'Love Buzz', a cover of the Dutch band Shocking Blue, is a weird and warped little thing, a far more ambitious, tongue-in-cheek and playful record than anything Mudhoney or Soundgarden were mustering at the time. Similarly, it's hard to imagine any of their contemporaries being capable of something like 'About A Girl'. Kurt's first true masterpiece, the fuzzy and deceptively sweet melodies and none-more-simple structure are undercut by the lyrical tangle of dependence, debt, conflict and lust – an unconventional treatment of a love song that'd crop up in 'Heart Shaped-Box', too – and showed Nirvana's soft underbelly could be just as arresting as their thrashes.

There's faults to be found in 'Bleach', of course: the throwaway dins of 'Big Cheese' and 'Swap Meet', for example, which amount to little more than grunge filler, and without Dave Grohl behind the drumkit, there's a lack of the power and precision that would help make 'Nevermind' into such a monster. But for all its rough edges and teething problems, there were still the first tell-tale signs that Nirvana could become something more significant than just another rock band: not a canonical album, maybe, but one which, in hindsight, makes it seem inevitable that future greatness beckoned.

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The original review

NME, July 8, 1989

Real rock music should hurt. Like being too near an exploding plate-glass window, it should get under your skin and cause you to writhe with a mixture of pleasure and pain.

If you find yourself nodding off to Guns N' Roses' occasional acoustic noodlings, then wake up to Nirvana. Scrap all that soft metal crap and get behind these brats! Nirvana are shot in negative for their cover photo, but don't be fooled, for there is a totally positive attitude to what they do. They walked into some guy's recording studio, stuck their $600 life savings into the breast pocket of his bowling shirt and said "Let's make a record... One that hurts!" 'Bleach' is the result.

This is the biggest, baddest sound that Sub Pop have so far managed to unearth. So primitive that they manage to make labelmates Mudhoney sound like Genesis, Nirvana turn up the volume and spit and claw their way to the top of the musical garbage heap. Included here (natch!) is their brilliant single 'Negative Creep', a leash-strainer of a song that eventually gets loose and goes on the rampage like a rabid rottweiler. Fab!

'Bleach' could be accused of being slightly top-heavy with too much filler (the overlong 'Sifting' being a prime example), but give it enough spins and even the silt rises to the top. Nirvana are undoubtedly at their best when they're playing short and punchy songs, as opposed to drawn-out experiments with sound. But what the hell! For a first LP, this sounds pretty damn good. Play these 'Bleach' boys all summer long.

■ EDWIN POUNCEY

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Bleach

Everything you need to know about Nirvana's unsung classic

track by track

1. Blew

The first song on Nirvana's debut opens with Krist Novoselic's dirtiest bass, and is as sludgy as Nirvana have ever sounded. This filth was a glorious accident, according to the song's drummer Chad Channing: "It was a song that initially was played in D. So when we went to record that song, it had turned out that we were already in D, and that everyone turned down, or at least Krist did, to C – it was even lower." In December 1989, half a year after originally appearing on 'Bleach', 'Blew' was released on a UK-only EP to coincide with Nirvana's European tour. Even then only 3,000 copies were printed. Also on the EP was the 'Bleach' track 'Love Buzz', plus the at-the-time unheard 'Been A Son' and 'Stain' which subsequently both came out on Nirvana's compilation album 'Incesticide' in 1992.

Key lyric: "Is there another reason for your stain/Could you believe who we knew was stress or strain/Here is another word that rhymes with shame"

2. Floyd The Barber

One of the earliest songs Kurt Cobain wrote for Nirvana, 'Floyd The Barber' was first played on the Evergreen State College radio station KAOS in May 1987. It was one of 10 songs recorded at the earliest 'Bleach' sessions in January 1988, when Nirvana didn't have a proper drummer so were borrowing Dale Crover from their pals The Melvins. The other songs recorded at the session were 'Spank Thru', 'Downer', 'Hairspray Queen', 'Mexican Seafood' and 'Pen Cap Chew'. This was the demo – celled the Dale Demo because of Crover's contribution – that Cobain sent to all the local record labels in the hope of getting a deal. 'Floyd The Barber' was the standout track, made all the more gnarly by Crover's drumming, and was the only track from the session to make it onto the original version of 'Bleach'. The lyrics were Kurt's take on the family-friendly American sitcom *The Andy Griffith Show*, which featured a character called Floyd who was, yup, a barber. Cobain's version features characters from the show – Barney Fife, Aunt Bee, Andy Griffith, Opie – conspiring to murder a customer. This is not what happened on TV.

Key lyric: "I sense others in the room/Opie, Aunt Bee, I presume/They take turns and cut me up/I die smothered in Andy's clutch"

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3. About A Girl

'About A Girl' is the earliest piece of evidence that Kurt Cobain enjoyed pop music melodies as much as he enjoyed hardcore bands and the Pixies. Written, Cobain once said, after listening to 1964's 'Meet The Beatles!' on repeat for hours, it's the only song on 'Bleach' that isn't hard and cold and metallic. It's also the only song on 'Bleach' that was considered worthy of inclusion at Nirvana's 1993 MTV Unplugged show. Poignantly, given Kurt's irritation at people's over-interest in songs such as 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', he introduced the song thus: "This is off our first record, most people don't own it." As poppy and pretty as it is, it's still raw, with Kurt sounding reassuringly miserable as he sing about a relationship that's slowly failing. The song's title came from a chat Kurt had with drummer Chad Channing. "What's it about?" asked Channing. "It's about a girl," said Cobain. Legend has it that the lyrics were written on a piece of paper on the dashboard of the band's tour van as they drove around Washington between shows.

Key lyric: "I'll take advantage while/You hang me out to dry/But I can't see you every night"

4. School

Simple. Loud. Bratty. Pure Led Zeppelin. 'School' is classic early Nirvana, and notable for two key reasons: 1) The band played it live more than any other song in their catalogue, and 2) it features only four lines of lyrics, which go: "*Won't you believe it? It's just my luck/No recess!/You're in high school again.*" On the surface the subject matter is obvious, especially as Cobain spoke extensively about how much he hated school. But various people close to Kurt suggest he was ripping into the cliquey Seattle music scene, which reminded him of his days as a student. There's even a quote flying around the internet of him saying: "If I could have thrown Soundgarden's name [into the song] I would have." An unofficial video for the song (as well as 'Big Cheese', 'Floyd The Barber' and the recently-written 'Lithium') was recorded on March 20 at Evergreen State College, but never officially released. It featured the band playing live while a video montage homemade by Kurt with shots of Donny and Marie Osmond tap dancing was projected onto a wall behind.

Key lyric: "You're in high school again"

5. Love Buzz

Arguably Nirvana's most important song, given the doors it opened. It brought with it a multitude of firsts. It was their first single, released on July 1988. It was the first song recorded with drummer Chad Channing, who was in the band for two years before being replaced by Dave Grohl. The sleeve featured the first time Kurt Cobain used the alternative spelling of his name, Kurdt Kobain, in public. It was the first track released on Sub Pop's Singles Club. It was the first track Cobain, when playing it live, would use to practice that move of his where he plays a guitar solo while moving around in a circle, lying on the floor. It was the first Nirvana song to be played on the radio, on local Seattle station KCMU, after Cobain called and requested it. And yet, for some reason, this cover of a song by Dutch band Shocking Blue didn't appear on the UK version of 'Bleach', which featured 'Big Cheese' instead. The UK got a proper taste when the band played it alongside 'Spank Thru' and the recently written 'Polly' at their first John Peel session in October 1989.

KEY LYRIC: "Would you believe me when I tell you you're the queen of my heart/Please don't deceive me when I hurt you, just ain't the way it seems" →

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6. Paper Cuts

On which Kurt Cobain sings from the point of view of a broken member of society, thus setting up a method of lyric-writing that he would use again and again, most notably on 'Polly' from 'Nevermind'. 'Paper Cuts' is based on a true story, and written about a child from Aberdeen in Washington who was held prisoner in a room along with her siblings. Their parents would only visit the children to feed them and remove the dirty newspapers the kids had been using as a toilet. It's heavy and dark, and of all the songs on 'Bleach' it sounds the most like Cobain's heroes the Melvins. This problem was perpetuated by the fact that the album version of the track featured Melvins drummer Dale Crover.

KEY LYRICS: "The lady I feel maternal love for cannot look me in the eyes/But I see hers and they are blue and they cock and twitch and masturbate"

7. Negative Creep

A brutal chug of a tune, about which Washington-based audio engineer Steve Fisk once said that he "got told it was about the guy who lived across the street from the duplex [Kurt was living in] and would come over while Kurt was gone to try to smoke Tracy [Marander, Kurt's girlfriend at the time] out." The chorus ("*Daddy's little girl ain't a girl no more*") is politely borrowed from the Mudhoney song 'Sweet Young Thing Ain't Sweet No More', and this is one of only two Nirvana songs to fade out. The other is 'Pen Cap Chew', which was recorded at the band's first sessions in January 1988. 'Negative Creep' was one of the tracks, along with 'About A Girl', 'Sifting' and 'Paper Cuts', that convinced Dave Grohl to join Nirvana. He said: "I loved 'Bleach', I thought it was great. It had everything that I really loved about music. It had the Beatles influence on 'About a Girl'. And 'Negative Creep' was amazing. And girls liked Nirvana."

Key lyrics: "I'm a negative creep and I'm stoned"

8. Scoff

Over a drumbeat straight outta 'My Sharona' by The Knack, Kurt Cobain gets his sludge on. 'Scoff', despite being ace, is one of the least talked about songs in Nirvana's history. Popular readings of the lyrics go something like this: "*In my eyes, I'm not lazy*" – Kurt reacting to someone calling him lazy; "*In my face, it's not over*" – Kurt still feeling angry once an argument has ended; "*In your room, I'm not older*" – Kurt feeling unhappy about being treated like a child by whoever he's fighting with. But considering Cobain's eventual suicide, it's easy to read things that aren't actually there into his lyrics. So perhaps 'Scoff' is one of the tracks on 'Bleach' that fits into the "I'm pissed off, I don't know what about, let's just scream negative lyrics" mentality that Kurt talked about having when recording the album.

Key lyrics: "Gimme back my alcohol"

9. Swap Meet

Another song about Kurt's early life in Aberdeen. 'Swap Meet' takes place in a flea market, and focuses on a middle-aged couple who make a living from selling the "*arts and crafts*" mentioned in the lyrics. Cobain had tackled this exact topic before on an earlier Nirvana song called 'Mrs Butterworth'. He's unimpressed by these people, and the song's chorus – "*Keeps his cigarettes close to his heart/Keeps her photographs close to her heart/Keep the bitterness close to their hearts*" – is cynical. Kurt liked the theme of the song so much that a few years later he nicked some of the words to use on Nirvana's first press biography for Geffen Records. On it, he described Krist Novoselic as the band member with a passion for "growing seashells and driftwood on burlap".

Key lyrics: "They make their living off of arts and crafts/The kind with seashells, driftwood and burlap/They make a deal when they come to town/The Sunday swap meet is a battle ground"

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10. Mr Moustache

Little known fact: Kurt Cobain was a funny guy! And never more so than on 'Mr Moustache', a song that tears into rednecks. This is a topic he was into, and on page 24 of *Journals* (Cobain's diaries, printed in 2002) is a four-frame comic book sketch also called Mr Moustache. It features an alpha male sort speaking to his unborn child in his wife's belly: "This kid better not be a lousy little girl. I want my very own honest, hard-workin', jew, spic, nigger, and faggot hatin 100% beef American male! I'll teach him how to work on cars and exploit women." The child's leg then bursts out of the belly and kicks the man's brains out.

Key lyric: "Yes I eat cow, I am not proud"

11. Sifting

"With Bleach, I didn't give a flying fuck what the lyrics were about," Kurt Cobain told *Spin* in October 1993, and on 'Sifting' it shows. There are moments, such as the line "*your eyes, teacher said*" that could be a reference to Kurt's baby blues being commented on at school. But mostly 'Sifting' is just Nirvana sounding "heavy as balls", as Dave Grohl once said. When the band first recorded the song, it was instrumental and used a wah-wah pedal.

Key lyric: "Spell the smell/Wouldn't it be fun?/Search for church/Wouldn't it be fun?/Wet your bed/Wouldn't it be fun?"

Extra tracks

12. Big Cheese

The B-side to 'Love Buzz' when it came out as Nirvana's debut single in November 1988. It was Sub Pop co-founder Jonathan Poneman who convinced Nirvana to put out 'Love Buzz' as their debut single, even though Kurt was reluctant to debut with a cover. So 'Big Cheese' is about Poneman. "I was expressing all the pressures that I felt from him at the time because he was being so judgmental about what we were recording," Cobain said. A video was shot on March 20, 1990 that used footage from Benjamin Christensen's 1922 film *Häxan: Witchcraft Through The Ages* chopped up with some Super 8 footage Kurt had made. According to the camereman on the day, Alex Kostelnik, Cobain's film was mostly "broken dolls, dolls on fire, dolls put together all wrong."

Key lyric: "Big cheese, make me"

13. Downer

Recorded for the first time by Cobain when he was still in his first band Fecal Matter, 'Downer' is one of the least Nirvana-sounding Nirvana songs: fast, subtle and complicated in parts. It is, though, full of incredibly miserable Cobain lyrics. When re-recorded as a Nirvana song at the first 'Bleach' sessions in January 1988, it was once again with Melvins drummer Dale Crover. He provided backing vocals.

Key lyric: "Sickening pessimist hypocrite master/Conservative communist apocalyptic bastard/Thank you, dear God, for putting me on this earth/I feel very privileged in debt for my thirst"

THE LOST SONGS

NIRVANA WERE NEVER SHY OF BANISHING SESSION TRACKS TO THE DUSTBINS OF HISTORY. HERE, WE UNEARTH THE LOST SPECIMENS OF THE 'BLEACH' ERA.

Marigold (1990)

Less than six months after joining Nirvana, Dave Grohl was in the studio alone recording what was basically a prototype Foo Fighters album, 'Pocketwatch' (released as a limited tape under the band name Late!). 'Marigold' stood out for a reason. The cracked voice, the sweet-as-honey harmonies, the simple pop charm of the melody – it all pointed to what Grohl could achieve beyond Kurt's shotgun suicide. It was later re-recorded by Nirvana as the B-side to 'Heart Shaped Box', and a live Foo Fighters version appeared on 'Skin And Bones'.

Stain (1989)

The best live Nirvana bootleg? 'Play The Fucking Guitar, Man!', hands down. Playing to a room full of drunk Austrians baying for blood with an Arnie workout video bellowing out orders behind, it's a raw distillation of the visceral power of Nirvana live. The little-heard 'Stain' brings things to a close, the crowd and band tumbling into a mess of screams, feedback and the odd glob of bodily fluid.

D-7 (1990)

The only track from Nirvana's second Peel Session not to feature on 'Incesticide'; this was Nirvana paying homage to heroes Wipers (the original was on their 1979 debut 'Is This Real?'). Pretty much a note for note copy, building up slowly into a slap of snotty intensity, Kurt may not have written the lines "*Straight as an arrow/ defect defect/Not straight, not so straight/ Reject reject*", but you know he meant it.

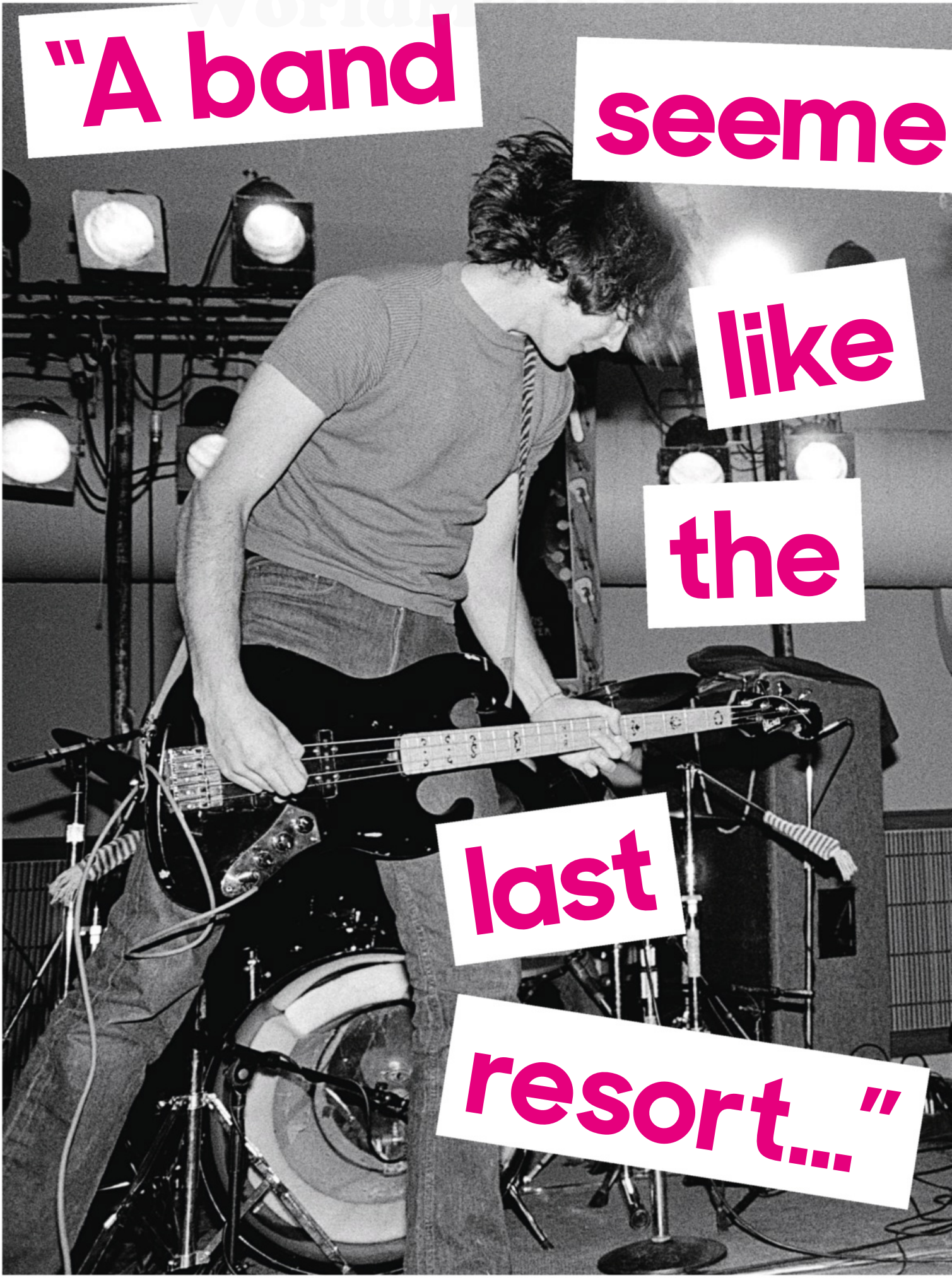
Beans (1988)

Is it "*Daddy ate some beans*"? "*Jackie ate some beans*"? "*Japhy ate some beans*"? It's difficult to tell, what with Kurt's voice distorted beyond recognition by a pitch-shifter that makes him sound like a doped-up smurf. Part of a four-song demo of "weird, quirky songs", Michael Azerrad wrote in his Nirvana biography *Come As You Are* that the band wanted to put it on 'Bleach', but their label boss stopped them.

Opinion (1990)

Kurt claimed that he wrote this while driving to a radio session for KAOS-FM in Olympia, Washington, hosted by K Records boss Calvin Johnson: "I wrote it while I was driving with one foot... I wanted it to be as spontaneous as possible, you know?" That it eclipses both 'Lithium' and 'Been A Son' as the session's stand-out track shows how easily – and coldly – Kurt could discard classics. ■

WORDS: TOM HOWARD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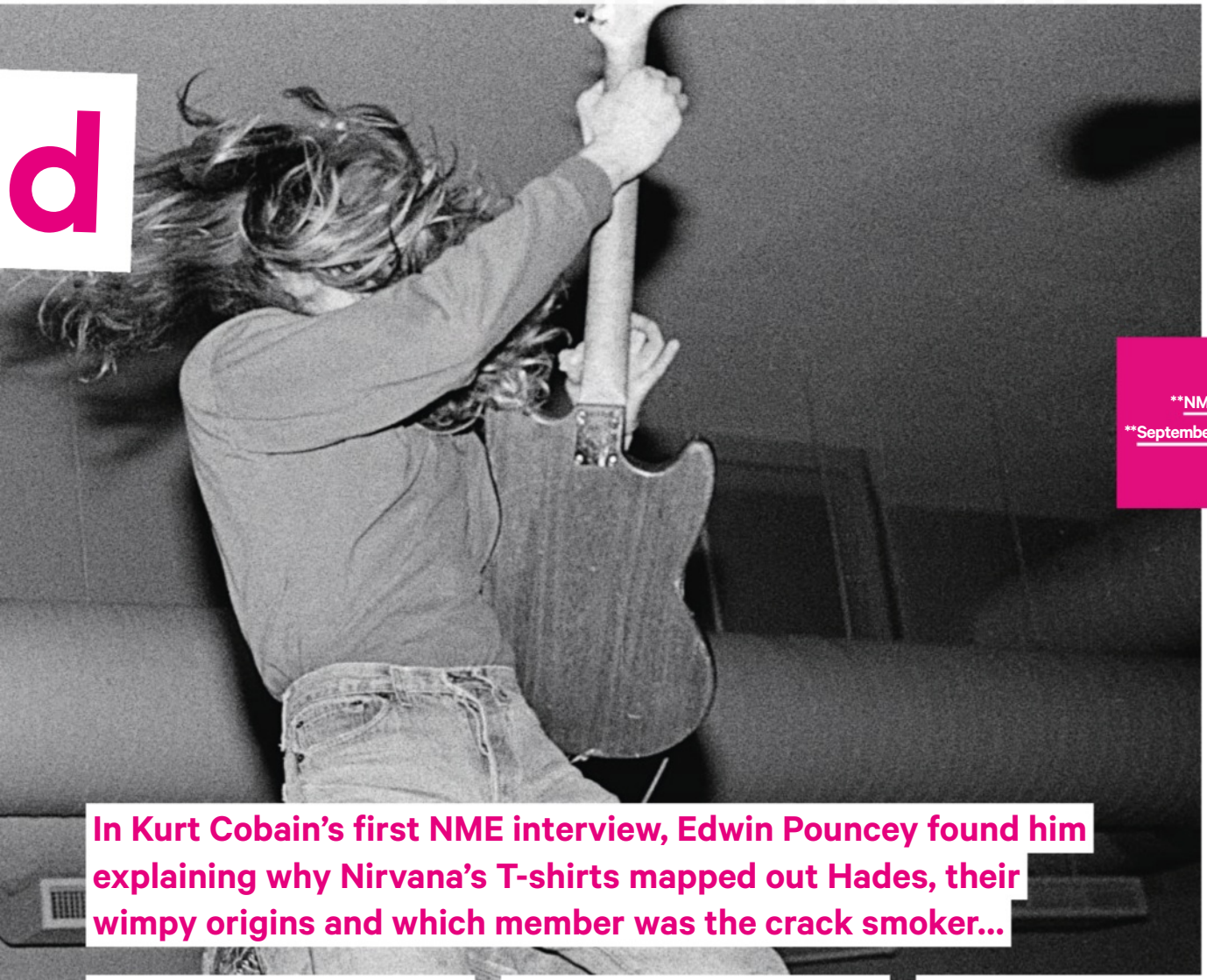

NME
September 2, 1989

In Kurt Cobain's first NME interview, Edwin Pouncey found him explaining why Nirvana's T-shirts mapped out Hades, their wimpy origins and which member was the crack smoker...

To reach Nirvana I first had to plug into the band's mainman Kurdt Kobain. He's hanging onto the end of a long-distance phone line just itching to tell me his life story.

"I started Nirvana because there was nothing else left to do," he explains. "I didn't like sports, so a band seemed like the last resort for something to do socially."

Kurdt's answer is casual enough, but hard to swallow when you hear the wonderful grungy pop that makes Nirvana the next in line to the wildly popular Mudhoney. By the time they tour Europe this coming October, Nirvana's future as the next big thing will be in the bag.

If it sounds like this particular power trio are nothing more than a rockin' fashion accessory, then listen to 'Bleach', the first Nirvana LP. While Kurt sings tenderly of girls and lost innocence, of youth corrupted and defiled, the other members of Nirvana plough a furrow of straight-ahead rock groove.

My first encounter with Nirvana was through their astonishing 'Love Buzz' 45, a limited-edition release on Sub Pop. 'Love Buzz' and its B-side 'Big Cheese' (the latter appearing on the UK release of 'Bleach') had all the sounds of a pop monster ringing through them. Kurdt looks back on 'Love Buzz' differently, however.

"I wish we could have recorded it a lot heavier. It was one of our first recordings. We weren't sure just what we wanted to do, so it turned out kind of wimpy compared to our most recent recordings."

One of the things that was left off 'Love Buzz' in its transferral to LP was a couple of seconds of cartoon show soundtrack recorded straight from the TV. This gave it a surreal and crazy quality that fitted perfectly with the opening bass guitar blows. Why did you decided to ditch it?

"Just to make it sound a little different, I guess. Originally, it was planned to have twice as much cartoon stuff at the beginning, but Bruce [Pavitt, Sub Pop headman] didn't like that idea, he said it went on too long. I'm into children's records... I collect children's records and obscure things like that. I have a very small rock record collection."

> "'Love Buzz' sounded wimpy'
> Kurt Cobain

Nirvana were a four-piece for the recording of 'Bleach', but with the exit of guitarist Jason Everman, they are back to a trio. "We've always been a three-piece," explains Kurdt. "It's definitely not personal difficulties involved here... it's musical differences."

Currently joining Kurdt on guitar are Chris Novoselic on bass guitar and Chad Channing on drums, a position that is somewhat subject to change: "So far we've had four drummers within two years!"

Hottest item this summer has to be the official Nirvana T-shirt, with the band's logo emblazoned over what looks like a set of tree rings or perhaps a detailed cross-section of a piece of bone. Neither of my guesses is right, however.

"It's a graph of the third ring of Hell from Dante's Inferno," reveals Kurdt. "On the back of that shirt it says 'Crack Smokin', Fudge Packin', Satan Worshippin' Motherf---ers.' Each member of the band represents one of those categories."

So which one are you?

"I haven't decided yet," he laughs. "We alternate!"

Meanwhile, if you hunger for more after 'Bleach', then be sure to pick up a copy of C/Z Records 'Teriyaki Asthma' EP, which features Nirvana's 'Mexican Seafood' contribution. Alternatively, wait for their upcoming promo EP, soon to be released on Tupelo with the provisional title of 'Winnebago'. Sounds like heaven to me. ■

CHARLES PETERSON

4

Wipers
Is This Real?

1980, Psycho

Kurt said: "Yes, it is. The Wipers were a Portland punk band who were started in the late '70s by Greg Sage and released maybe four or five albums. The first two were totally classic, and influenced the Melvins. All their songs were so good. Greg Sage was pretty much the romantic, quiet, visionary kind of guy. What more can I say about them? They started Seattle grunge rock in Portland, 1977."

▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED 1979 **▶RELEASE DATE:** 1979 **▶LENGTH** 34:41 **▶PRODUCER** Greg Sage **▶HIGHEST UK CHART POSITION** N/A **TRACKLISTING** ▶1. Return Of The Rat ▶2. Mystery ▶3. Up Front ▶4. Let's Go Away ▶5. Is This Real? ▶6. Tragedy ▶7. Alien Boy ▶8.D-7 ▶9. Potential Suicide ▶10. Don't Know What I Am ▶11. Window Shop For Love ▶12. Wait A Minute

FIVE FACTS

1 John Peel favourites Wipers, formed in Portland, Oregon in 1977, have also been namechecked by Melvins, Stephen Malkmus of Pavement, Nation Of Ulysses, Dinosaur Jr and Hole as an influence.

2 Greg Sage's original idea for the Wipers was to record 15 albums in 10 years and never to tour or do interviews. He managed to make nine albums in 19 years, and played very few live shows despite gaining a cult following in thrall to their rare but memorable appearances.

3 Sage also attempted to launch a Portland punk scene with his own label Trap. Sage has claimed he "never made a cent" in the first 20 years that 'Is This Real?' was in print, due to bootlegging.

4 Nirvana covered two songs from the album, 'Return Of The Rat' and 'D-7'.

5 The album was reissued in 1993 by Sub Pop, including extra tracks from the subsequent 'Alien Boy' EP.

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5

Pixies
Surfer Rosa

1988, 4AD

Kurt said: "A die-cast metal fossil of misplaced craft with or without the fucking production. Everyone who's ever commented on it has said, 'Yeah, the production's amazing'. I agree, but the songs are so strong, it wouldn't have mattered if you'd listened through a boom-box. I was completely nihilistic up until about four or five years ago, when I first heard this. It changed my attitude. It made me finally admit, after being into punk rock for so many years, that I liked other styles as well. It made me finally admit that I'm a music lover. Their music reminded me of the music that I always wanted to do – and was doing – before I got into punk rock, eight or nine years ago. When I first started writing songs, they were a mixture of punk and The Beatles, but then I abandoned that and did nothing but Black Flag rip-offs. When this came out, Sub Pop was happening and I was starting to write those sort of hard rock, Iggy/Aerosmith songs again."

▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED 1987 **▶RELEASE DATE:** 1988
▶LENGTH 32:50 **▶PRODUCER** Steve Albini
▶HIGHEST UK CHART POSITION N/A
TRACKLISTING ▶1. Bone Machine ▶2. Break My Body ▶3. Something Against You ▶4. Broken Face ▶5. Gigantic ▶6. River Euphrates ▶7. Where Is My Mind? ▶8. Cactus ▶9. Tony's Theme ▶10. Oh My Golly! ▶11. Vamos! ▶12. I'm Amazed ▶13. Brick Is Red

LYRIC ANALYSIS

"I was swimmin' in the Caribbean/ Animals were hiding behind the rocks/Except the little fish/ But they told me, he swears/Tryin' to talk to me, to me, to me" ('Where Is My Mind?')

A true story – Black Francis went scuba diving in the Caribbean and was chased by a small fish. "I don't know why," he said, "I don't know too much about fish behaviour."

"P! I! X! I! E! S!" ('Cactus')

During the break in 'Cactus' you can hear the band members and producer Steve Albini spelling out the band's name. This was in homage to T. Rex, who spelled out their own name during 'The Groover'. Of the people in attendance at the sessions, only Kim Deal's then-husband John Murphy refused to join in.

"What a big black mass, what a hunk of love" ('Gigantic')

Kim Deal has credited the main influence on 'Gigantic' to the film *Crimes Of The Heart*, the story of a married woman falling for a young black man. The title, however, was merely a reference to how big the chord progression sounded.

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Kurt's influences

Pixies

The band that forced Kurt to admit he "liked other music too", Pixies were a fundamental influence on Cobain's music. In this early interview with the Boston quiet/loud pioneers from 1988, NME's Adrian Thrills hitches a ride with them in New Jersey

Artistic licence is one thing, but the kind of detours that Pixies take on the way to their live appearances are something else altogether. This one involves a slave trap, a sudden snowstorm in West Virginia and a deadline-surfing delay that almost meant the band having to pull out of a prestigious concert with their spiritual peers and label buddies Throwing Muses on the outskirts of New York City. It is the sort of thing that could give their amiable manager an ulcer, the sort of almost-surreal thing that could only happen to a Pixie in the springtime.

This is Sinatra territory, a rock club called Maxwell's in Hoboken, New Jersey, a taxi ride across the Hudson River from the sirens and skylines of Manhattan. On a cramped, compact stage, Pixies are blowing up an unholy storm, an adrenaline-fuelled primal pounding given an extra rush by the inter-state dash to meet their allotted stage time.

The snow had delayed them and the perfectly preserved 'trap' – a gruesome ornament on the wall of a college where they had stopped for help – had shocked them. But Pixies adhere to one of the oldest trouper's adages: the show must go on.

A lorry-load of limiting labels – from art to punk, from hardcore to Latino rock – have been heaped enthusiastically on this Boston-based quartet. But no tag really does justice to the cauldron of fiery sparks and burning embers that is a Pixies live show. Singer Black Francis, a Californian relocated to Boston, is a young, bull-faced stag of a bloke. A cross between Iggy Pop in his Detroit heyday and Emilio Estevez in *Repo Man*, he sings songs of shadily exotic places and sleazy practices, songs that have no specific messages but still paint a vulgar and evocative vista of changing feelings and faces.

Sharing lead vocals with Black is bassist Kim – credited as Mrs John Murphy on the sleeve of the band's new 4AD album 'Surfer Rosa' – a sharp-tongued cookie from Dayton, Ohio, who was the only woman to answer an advert for a musician in the Boston Phoenix. Filipino guitarist Joey Santiago and drummer David Lovering, the latter the only native Bostonian in the group, complete the quartet.

With their radar-blip powerchords and multi-layered melodic strengths, Pixies are more orthodox and more accessible than Throwing Muses – with whom they share a bill on a forthcoming UK tour – but the spirit that they represent is the same. Along with a number of others, these bands are re-energising US rock music at a time when its UK counterpart seems to have lost much of its spontaneity, intuition and sense of daring.

Black Francis, who is also known as Charles, has no great theories about why this hot-blooded band of sonic giants are the way they are. He just likes rock music and he likes to yell, both as LOUD as possible. The current album, produced by Big Black renegade Steve Albini, illustrates his (non-) philosophy perfectly.

"There's a lot of imperfection on the record," he says. "Some of it is too quiet. Some of it is too loud. Some of the songs are not sung as well as they could be. We recorded it in two weeks and I don't like to do too many takes of a song. It's just a record of those two weeks. It's very uneven. It's almost live in the way it's cranked up. It's basically just live, loud rock music."

Before settling in Boston, Charles, still only 21, spent a period at college in Puerto Rico, a strongly Hispanic island in the Caribbean. It was an experience that inspired him, and Hispanic nuances live on vibrantly in songs like 'Vamos', 'Isla De Encanta' and 'Oh My Golly!', the latter song providing the phrase "*Surfer Rosa*".

"The song is about a beach called Piñones, which means 'the pines', just outside San Juan in Puerto Rico. It's a great, long beach with the jungle on one side and the ocean on the other. There are a lot of women in really sleazy bathing suits, big tits and big asses, hanging out with macho Latino guys in big cars. The atmosphere is rowdy and that's what we try to convey in the song. It was a great place, even though it was a little dangerous after dark with drugs and guns." Charles is drawn to the Spanish language's sensuality, but is wary of his hot-blooded infatuation being taken wrongly.

"I think more English people pick up immediately on the Spanish thing. Hispanic influences are more obvious in American cities than in England, so it doesn't seem so strange to Americans. But I'm not Hispanic myself and I only lived in Puerto Rico for a while.

"It's probably just a little pretentiousness on my part, showing off that I know a little Spanish. But I'm a bit fearful that people will get the wrong idea. People might think I'm putting a downer on Puerto Rican culture, but that is not the case. We played one place where there were a lot of Puerto Rican girls and they liked the idea of me adopting the dialect. Maybe one day we will even go and play on that Piñones beach!"

NME
April 23, 1988

Some of the other Pixies influences are more prosaic, however, as a self-deprecating Charles explains.

"The Latino stuff is only about 20 per cent of what we do. The rest is just regular old Velvets and Stooges stuff. I don't have a huge record collection, so I just go for things that are recommended. I was told that the Velvets made classic records and, sure enough, they were classic. They might be overplayed and overrated, but there is no getting away from the fact that *they are good*."

If the meaning of a Pixies song is a little loose, the imagery is more constant. The sexual, the organic and the Biblical crop up regularly as themes race from the erotic to the exotic. Never far away, however, is the spice of danger.

"I've led a pretty safe life," says Charles. "It's been a protected life, a life that has been a bit boring and unadventurous. So the few unsafe and adventurous things that I have done have stayed with me. I take a kind of pride in them, wear them as a badge. It means a lot to me, which is why they crop up in the songs. Maybe one day we will be a message band, but right now I'm too young to have any messages. Half the time I don't know what I think anyway. American society is so fractured that people don't know what they should be striving for. I was raised one way and rejected that, so what am I supposed to be? Am I supposed to be an educated man at school or a bum on the road, the slut of the Western world or a man of religion?"

The latter would appear out of the question, although religion does hold a strange fascination.

"I have rejected the religion I was taught, but I do have a lot of respect for people with strong religious beliefs. They are very easy people to pick on, but some of them are so bizarre that you can't help but be fascinated... the Bible is a really freaky book. The Old Testament is full of sex and violence, intermarriage and people screwing each other, people ripping each other apart and people turning into a pillar of salt. It's all very dramatic."

So is the power and drama of Pixies an exorcism of sexual and spiritual frustration? A primal yell from the young American heartland? A scream from a red giant or the whimper of a cherry baby? Or is it all only rock 'n' roll?

"People always talk about performers getting out their frustrations on stage. Maybe there is some truth in that, but I'm usually too self-conscious about the actual performance. Do we sound good? Do people like it? My aggression is the last thing on my mind when I'm on stage. All the yelling is just another way of being dramatic... I'm really more like a little flower!"

Don't you believe it! ■

TOM SHEEHAN/4AD ARCHIVE

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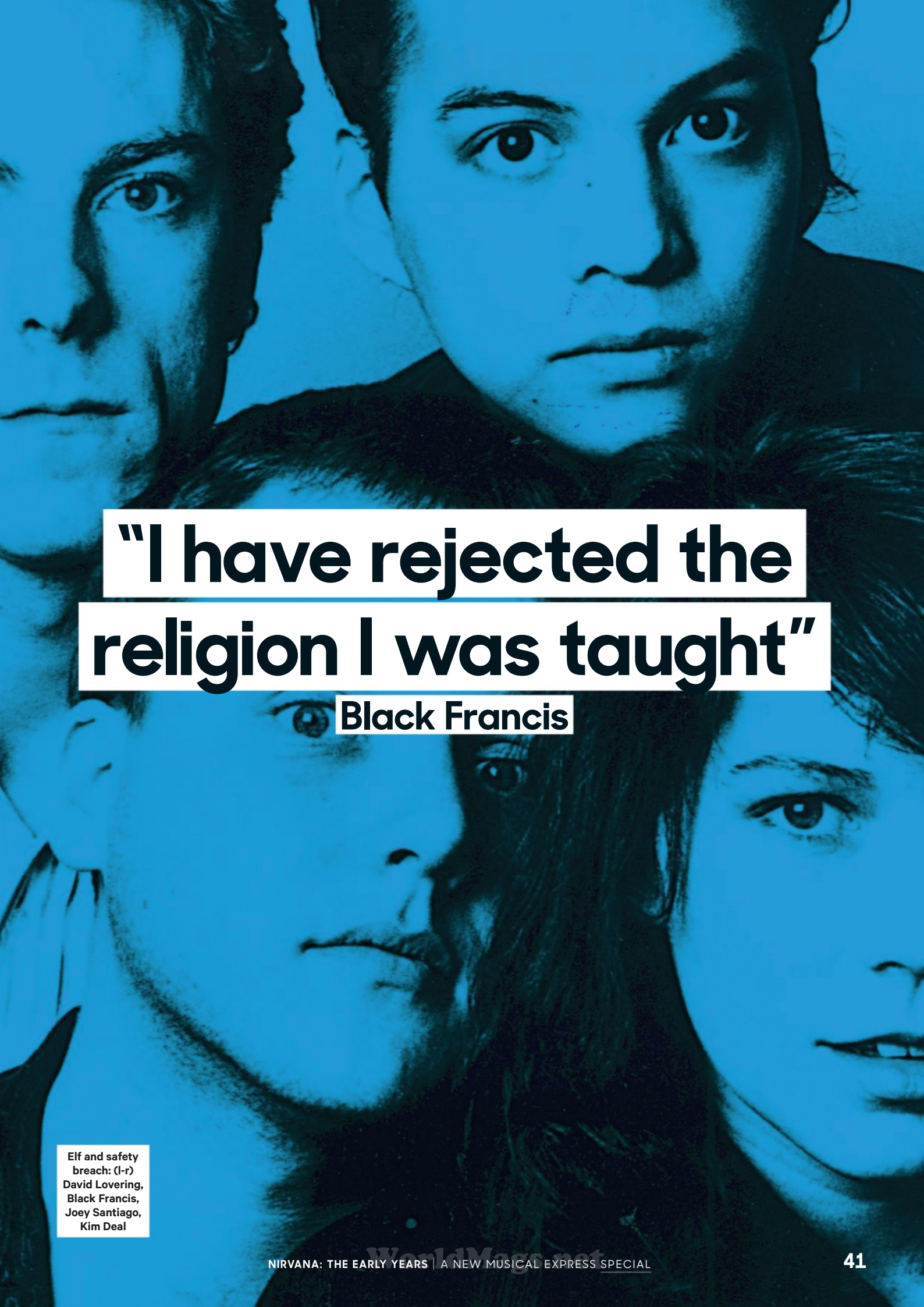

"I have rejected the religion I was taught"

Black Francis

Elf and safety breach: (l-r) David Lovering, Black Francis, Joey Santiago, Kim Deal

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▶FROM THE ARCHIVE

"We were branded Satanists back home"

Melody Maker
October 21, 1989

As Nirvana plotted their first UK invasion, Melody Maker's Everett True cornered them to talk devil-worship, competitive tree climbing and acid

Feel the noise. Everywhere you go, everywhere you look, Britain is being swamped in a deluge of long hair, hoary old Black Sabbath licks and American upstarts from Seattle. Rich and poor kids with nothing better to do now create devastating slabs of rock'n'roll and blow us away with their amplified use of the wah-wah and suffocating power-chords. It's music which seems to have no real sense of purpose, except to say "Hi, we're here and aren't we having fun?" Soon it will be time to sweep the whole sorry mess under our carpets and wish to god that Jimi Hendrix never set his guitar on fire, but until then, I'd like you to welcome in the very best of the new breed on the block, hot in the footsteps of Mudhoney: Nirvana.

Nirvana are very much a band who would like to say, "Hi, this is us and we're having fun, too", but are also a little weird. They're a little bit gross and a little bit awesome. And a bit too determined to be content with just messing around. What else could you be if you grew up in the redneck helltown of Aberdeen, a zillion miles away from the capital of the Northwest, Seattle?

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Who says grungers don't get outside enough?

CHARLES PETERSON

Their bassist, Chris Novoselic, takes up the story.

"See, Kurdt had this tape, right?" he explains. "And we're living in Aberdeen and he made it with Dale, the drummer of The Melvins. That was '86, maybe. I heard it and I thought it was really cool, so I said to start this band, so we started a band and we went through three drummers and we're here today, talking to you."

Chris is over six foot tall, friendly and wired. A competitive tree-climber, he was born and raised in Yugoslavia and looks forward to rockin' the Iron Curtain on a forthcoming tour of Europe with Tad. Born outdoors, he worked as a commercial fisherman in Alaska for three years, painted bridges and has Elvis sideburns.

Kurdt Kobain is the vocalist, guitarist and main songwriter behind the trio, who turned into a quartet for 'Bleach', but became a trio again after extraneous guitarist Jason Everman upped plectrums and joined Soundgarden as bassist in July. He's your archetypal small guy – wiry, defiantly working class and fiery. His provincial, witty lyrics bring to mind a US Mark E Smith.

Chris: "We were branded Satanists back home. This girl came knocking on our door looking for a wallet and she goes, 'You know what the other kids told me in the neighbourhood? Don't go there, they worship the Devil.' That's why nobody ever bothered us in the redneck country. We would neither confirm or deny Satanic affiliations."

"Maybe it was those desecrated cemetery pieces burned in our front yard," Kurdt wonders. "But you didn't have to do anything to be considered extreme back there. Just take a lot of acid."

Chad Channing, the drummer, is the quietest of the trio. Onstage he's a visual blur. He'd be a cook if it wasn't for this. He looks permanently stoned.

"Why did I start playing music?" he says. "Boredom, I guess. I wanted to be able to play the drums. I still do."

FOOTNOTE 1
Novoselic was actually born to Croatian parents in Compton, California. The family moved to LA shortly afterwards, and then on to Aberdeen, when Krist was 14. Krist spent some time living with relatives in Zadar, Croatia, then part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

FOOTNOTE 2
The name that Kurt chose to be beautiful rather than punky or macho ended up getting them in hot water when they were sued in 1992 by a UK prog rock act of the '70s also called Nirvana. The bands eventually settled out of court and both continued using the name. Everett True claimed that Geffen had paid the proggers $100,000, though the figure remained undisclosed.

"99 per cent of music out there is bullshit"

Krist Novoselic

So who do Nirvana listen to? Oh, the usual: Aerosmith, Tuxedomoon, NWA, Herman And The Hermits, Lead Belly, hard rock, punk rock, power pop, hip-hop, Sub Pop – the sensibilities of the late '70s mixed with the raw power of the late '60s. Are they aware of any kind of "Sub Pop movement"?

Kurdt: "Sort of, but we didn't start playing this stuff to join in, it just happened that way. Sure, we're heavy, but a little bit diverse maybe. The album has a couple of beautiful pop tunes on it."

Chris: "We're definitely not groundbreaking. If there was no Sub Pop sound, we'd still be doing this. If there's anything we're really close to, it's The Stooges – the momentum and the energy."

Where Nirvana differ from their contemporaries is in the strength of Kurdt's songwriting. Among those in the know, Nirvana are said to be the cream of the crop (if they get their live act together). Listen to 'Bleach' and you can hear it. 'Blew', 'About A Girl', 'Big Cheese', 'Sifting'; all these songs are crafted around a firm base of tune, chorus, harmony. OK, so they might smother them a bit with licks that'd do prime-time Sabbath proud, but what the heck?

I ask Nirvana what their name means to them.

"Big amplifiers," Chris replies, incisively.

Nirvana were once called too complex for their own good by our own Simon Reynolds – the opposite to how I'd describe them.

Kurdt: "Well, the track he was describing ['Spank Thru'] was pretty much the most complex thing we've ever done. We're moving towards simplicity and better songwriting all the time. There are two songs on the album which have only two parts to them. That one has three. Fuck that guy, what does he know? He was probably in a bad mood or something! He doesn't like Robert Fripp, that's for sure. He probably doesn't listen to Eno, either, which is stupid. Eno's great!"

Chris: "We just want to make people happy. We just want to ROCK! Ninety-nine percent of music out there is bullshit. There are way too many bands out there and they just get in the way. So quit! Give it up! Turn in your guitars for shovels! You guys suck!"

Chad: "Yeah, all bands should have shovels or chainsaws, so they can get out there and *work* the stage!"

Nirvana shortly have a limited-edition 12-inch coming out on Tupelo featuring 'Blew', 'Love Buzz' and two new tracks. It's great! They're gonna be here any day now, touring with Tad. Don't, for Hendrix's sake, miss them. ■

FOOTNOTE 3
Yes, Kurt Cobain didn't just pick the same band name as a prog act, he also had secret prog leanings himself. He cited the album 'Red' by Fripp's group King Crimson as a major influence, and reportedly asked Butch Vig to aim for its guitar sound on 'Nevermind'.

LIVE

Live Buzz!

November 1989: Nirvana hit the UK's shores with Tad. NME and Melody Maker reviewers were there to catch the birth of a phenomenon

SOAS, London

Melody Maker, November 4, 1989

Big sweatball Tad obviously loves his playful lambs, as they crunch each other's bones in the steaming pile of humanity below him. "OK, my little snapperheads," he grunts. "Keep it up, motherfuckers, keep it going."

At one with their Falstaffian frontman, Tad the band make music that is bulky and unstoppable, gorged on elephantic riffs and vast drum stampedes. Songs are thrown up with gonzoid glee, and the crowd devour them like a pack of hyenas. The man himself bangs and heaves like Meat Loaf's psychotic nephew, hands like sides of beef wringing hell out of his guitar, the most perfect antithesis of America's endless supply of glammed-up chicks-with-dicks to ever stomp a stage.

Although much of their material relies on the same unswerving gridlock approach, it works every time. BLAM! go the band, SLAM! go the fans, and everyone's happy for a few minutes more. The songs – 'Behemoth', 'Sex God Missy', 'Pork Chop' – straddle a line between intriguing low-life fables and sicko fairy tales. Whatever's going on in a song like 'Nipple Belt', you know that at best it's distinctly unpleasant.

At one point, the baying mob gain control of the mic, and a shout of "Spacemen 3!" is greeted with the derision it deserves. Later, Tad is soaked by a pint and spends a good few minutes asking the chicken-shit pussy wimp responsible to step up and face him. The culprit fails to show, funnily enough.

Such banter, coupled with Tad's relentless bludgeoning, is ultimately wearing. Tad are the sound of God's balls knocking together for an hour, with your head jammed in between.

Seconds into Nirvana's opener, the dirty, pulsating 'School', and it's like the crowd have been shot full of electricity. Before long they're leaping off the PA into the throng boot-first, numbed by drugs, drink and the raw excitement of Nirvana's unpredictable rock'n'roll.

Singer/guitarist Kurdt Kobain – his skinny frame lost in the space vacated by Tad – has a voice to reduce grown men and women to tears, a hoarse, anguished cry that can turn a good song into an unforgettable one. And this band have plenty of those.

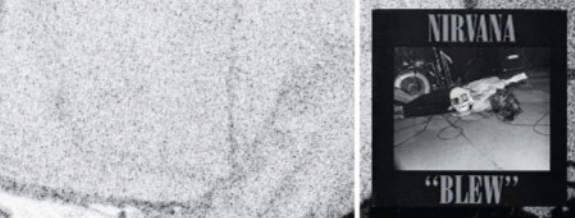
Nirvana work from their own rock blueprint, pushing their songs through an emotional and physical grinder, each one edging towards a private precipice inside Kobain's mind. Unlike Tad, Nirvana colour their darkness with splashes of stark beauty, like the bittersweet refrain of 'About A Girl', only to turn on themselves with the cold power of something like 'Floyd The Barber'.

A fan climbs atop the PA and teeters on the edge, poised like an Olympic diver; a ripple of "No way..." passes through the hall, and he's gone, a neatly executed back-flip sending him to oblivion. As another swings from a pipe on the ceiling, Nirvana reach some sort of crazy peak, bursting hearts and brains alike with 'Negative Creep', a brutal, ballistic defoliant of a song.

You can't argue or reason with stuff like this. Nirvana were superb, cranked-up, desperate and fucking loud. ■ NEIL PERRY

Redferns

The single reviews



Blew
(Sub Pop)

NME, November 18, 1989

Nirvana have clearly been holed up somewhere for the past 20 years in a home studio held together with paperclips and only a Blue Cheer album for comfort. Tons of energy, whirring guitars, deliberately perverse bass riffs, and no particular worry about putting guitar solos where verses ought to be make this four-track horror work. 'Love Buzz' is the real scorcher, right down to the paddling-in-melted-chocolate two-beat drums and crap lyrics. If I was 15, hated black music and lived a frustrated Nuneaton life, then I'd buy this without hesitation. ■ IAN MCCANN

Melody Maker, October 28 , 1989

I thought this lot were supposed to char the flesh off your bones, curdle your marrow and leave you with the impression that your ass had well and truly been kicked? Dismal, muddy, thuggish trad-rock that adds further weight to the notion that Sub Pop is the hype of '89. These warhorse riffs are only fit for the knacker's yard.
■ SIMON REYNOLDS

CAMERA PRESS/ED SIRRS

LIVE

The Astoria, London

NME, December 16, 1989

"CHECK!... CHECK!..." This is one little improvisation that the fans freezing outside are missing as Sub Pop stalwarts Nirvana struggle valiantly to balance the sound to their satisfaction, mere minutes before the doors open.

"Give us everything you've got!" barks Nirvana's beanpole bass player Chris Novoselic to the mixing desk. "Give us more tubas, more cellos!" A mini-LP of Nirvana's soundcheck would not be a totally unlistenable artefact. Sure, there's the usual tub-thumping run-through of the drumkit, the seemingly endless bass boogie and the usual guitar noodling. Once that's out of the way, however, Nirvana begin to flex their imagination and turn an equipment run-through into a free-form composition, a taste of what to expect in a few minutes when Nirvana take the stage for real... "CHECK!"

The trio of bands who make up this evening's bill (headlined by Mudhoney), under the temporary banner of Lamefest UK '89, are proof positive that the Seattle scene, and Sub Pop in particular, are no sudden next-big-thing hype. A spirit of comradeship, of artistic equality, is in the air at the Astoria this evening, a feeling of wellbeing is omnipresent and everybody's adrenaline is channelled into enjoying themselves. For Nirvana and Tad it's the end of this particular road and so they choose to play party animal, rather than prove their worth all over again.

"This is the last show on the tour, so we can do what the fuck we want!" yells Novoselic to the masses, his excuse for the doodling interlude that both he and drummer Chad Channing have had to perform whilst guitarist Kurdt Kobain fixes a broken string that snapped during Nirvana's opening number... a bad omen? Kurdt returns, plugs in and smashes into 'Love Buzz', Nirvana's neatest song in my book and one that still showers sparks. Kurdt Kobain and his guitar remain superglued together throughout Nirvana's non-stop, high-voltage performance. Occasionally, he'll take a head-first dive onto the stage to land awkwardly like a busted rag doll at the feet of bass beatnik Novoselic, only to rise again unharmed and play on without his fingers ever leaving the fretboard.

Nirvana are Sub Pop's answer to The Beatles, pop masters with a sense of hard rock and songs that penetrate the memory of their audience. 'Blew' (their latest 45) is a classy example of this, a hit for sure if the rest of the world wasn't so stupid and half asleep.

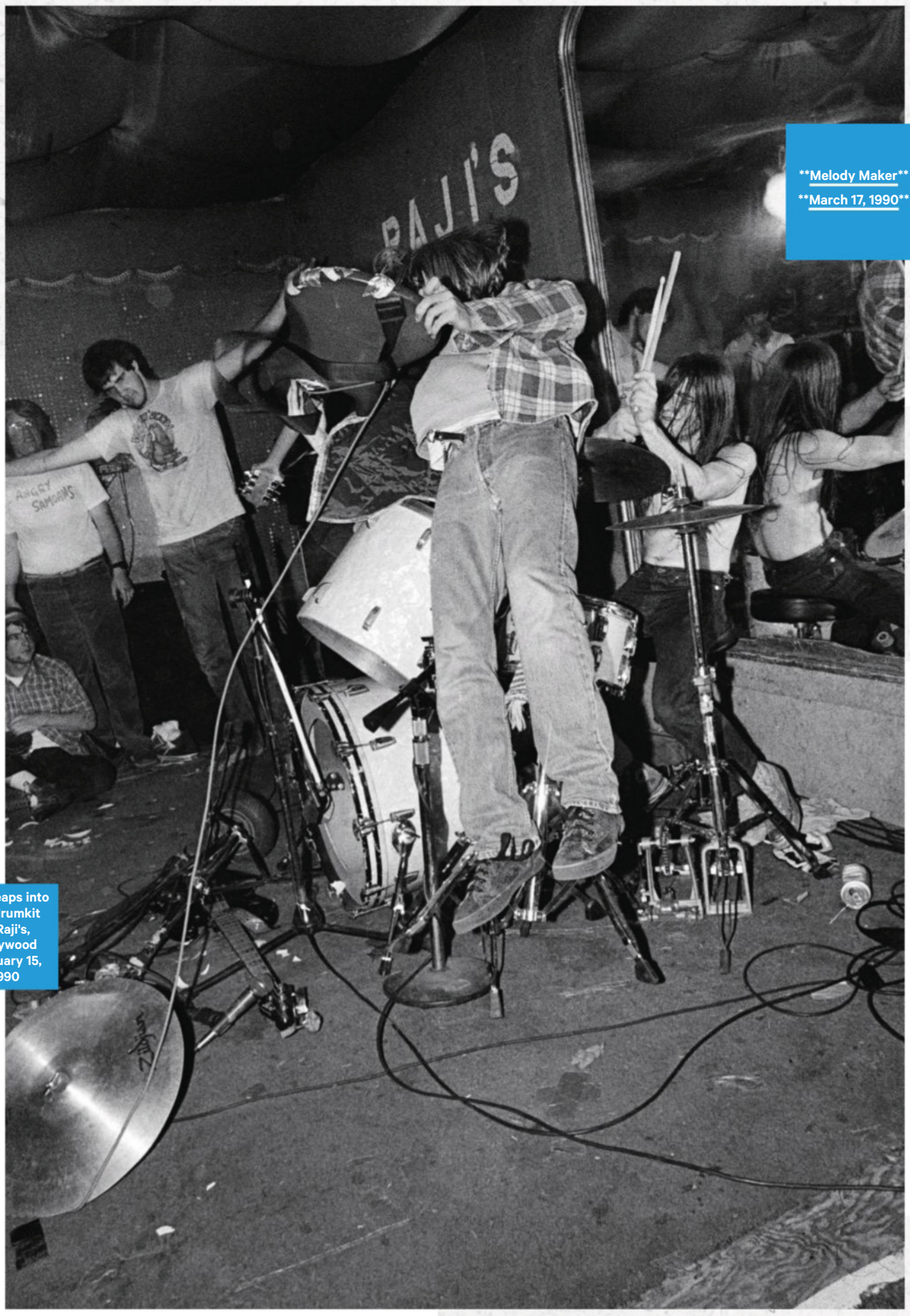
Nirvana kick off tonight's set by busting a string; as an encore they decide to bust up their guitars! Chris pulls his bass over his shoulder like a baseball bat and gives Kurt's flung guitar an almighty THWACK! It explodes into matchwood and the audience leaps onstage to pick up the pieces; Nirvana have fans already.

Tad Doyle (the man) is a lumbering hulk of a guitar player. A gone-to-pot Pavarotti, Tor Johnson in a fright-wig, the meanest mouth that has flapped open onstage for quite some time. Tad (the band) are equally ugly, foul-mouthed and hilarious, the complete opposite of the flashing young thrash of their Nirvana and Mudhoney counterparts. Tad are slower, heavier, grungier. It's the musical equivalent of a Bigfoot Monster Truck flattening the roofs of a dozen lined-up Lincoln Continentals.

Tad Doyle smashes his knuckled fist into the strings of his guitar and bellows, "MOTHERFUCKER!", then falls flat on his back and crawls slowly back onto his knees in a parody of Kurdt Kobain's more energetic stage antics. Tad's take on rock pokes out its big yellow tongue and sticks it firmly in the ear of the audience. They play for half the time that Nirvana took, yet they manage to leave as much of a lasting impression, as Doyle ditches his guitar and begins to ape the head-jerking front row by pretending to be a giant jelly on a plate. "YOU'RE FAT!" he sneers... be thankful that Tad decided against stage-diving!

■ EDWIN POUNCEY

TIM PATON



Melody Maker
March 17, 1990

Kurt leaps into the drumkit at Raji's, Hollywood February 15, 1990

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"We're going to get our asses kicked one day..."

The Tad and Nirvana tour rolled on into 1990 and, as it hit the US west coast, Everett True tagged along to hear about being mistaken for child-molesters, riling the locals and running people over...

You know what it's like, touring with a band. Time seems to stretch into infinity – just an endless procession of highways, byways, houses, factories and the odd traffic jam. You eat a little, you sleep a little. You pray that your van doesn't break down and end up in a crash. If you've got a little dope, you light that up too – anything to relieve the boredom.

We're in a van with Tad, travelling the 160 miles between Seattle and Portland along the west coast of America. It's sheeting it down with rain and it's early night-time, visibility zero, with clouds of cigarette smoke coiling up the inside. We're losing a battle against time, as usual, for the soundcheck for tonight's show with Screaming Trees and Nirvana at Portland's Pine Street Theatre, but we're doing OK, stoked up on tapes of the new Boss Hog, Bastro and Melvins albums, M&Ms and crackers.

It's just another night on the road.

Tad and his band have just released a new mini-LP, 'Salt Lick', and they're out touring the West Coast of America with Nirvana to promote it; Portland through to San Francisco, Long Beach and Phoenix. The usual. It's a tour that will take them through February, and the best part of March.

Portland was great: 500 backwoods punks dancing to the bands, Nirvana trashing a few guitars through frustration, Tad wobbling with his usual aplomb (albeit a little rustily), and the whole place like a Palm Springs pinball machine that nobody could touch me on. There was a video crew present to record all three bands and they were rewarded with a show of blistering proportions; metal twisted and distorted and gouged so out of shape, its origins were barely recognisable. →

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Afterwards, Tad seemed a little put out over the reaction.

Kurt Danielson, Tad: "The Portland scene is real protective of their own kind, like they consider people from out of town outsiders. They're kind of standoffish. Some people have a real grudge against Seattle, because the two cities have been in contention for attention for quite some time, and Seattle's getting the best of it presently."

"The backstage people at the Sacramento show were weird. They were big black fellows, wearing backless leather chaps and blue police jackets with Sacramento police badges on their chests – probably police officers or something. And they'd go, 'Hey, y'all play through here very much? Well how about giving me and my girlfriend a shirt so we can have a good Valentine's Day for everybody?' They real pushy people. So, consequently, I did the hula dance and they all skirted away, for fear of losing a limb due to my hips gyrating."

Kurt: "A couple of nights ago, Gary [Thorstensen, the guitarist] and I got all fucked up in San Jose, and crashed out in a van at six in the morning. At about nine there was a rap on the side of the van and there was a cop standing right there, and I emerged from this drunken stupor, not knowing what was going on.

"He tells us he's received a complaint from a young mother who's walking her children to this elementary school right across the street. She was concerned we might pose a threat to her children, that we might go out and molest them or something. So, we had to move the van two blocks away. I would've liked to have molested some children, but it was too early in the morning."

Tad: "San Jose is a cultural backwater, a hellhole. We played there to a metal crowd on Sunday night and we got to make fun of the regulars. You can always tell the regulars because they hang out at the bar; big hairspray, no ozone, spandex faggots – just like you British guys in fact."

I know. I'm one of them.

Tad: "Jerry, I think you should perform tonight."

Life on the road, especially in America, the land of the free, does have its compensations, as Kurt elaborates.

Kurt: "We go into all these wild porn shops while on tour; there was one in San Jose which had life-size rubber fists. They had a whole library of books, including one called *My Curious Friend, Sparky* about this girl and her doberman."

Steve: "It's disgusting!"

Kurt: "We can't wait until we get to Tijuana; they've got donkey shows down there. They call them "three-ring-circuses". That's donkeys having sex with humans."

Tad: "We're going to get real fucked up and go down there."

So how else should red-blooded American country boys behave?

Tad playing at the Raji's gig

Nirvana have a quality which is similar to Dinosaur Jr. They create classic songs, steeped in tradition and the lore of the '60s, but immerse them in some of the richest guitar sounds around. Songs like 'About A Girl', 'Blew' and 'Reciprocal' trash any idea of them belonging to some latter-day Led Zep tradition, while they sneakily draw on a rich seam of '60s American pop like 1910 Fruitgum Company and The Chocolate Watchband.

Singer Kurdt Kobain's voice is strangely resonant in its harshness. It can hide the sweetest melody, and then unleash it on you, just when you're least expecting it. Those critics who witter on about them being "devastating", "thundering" and "grungenomic" (er?) are right, of course, but are only picking up on half the story.

Nirvana, themselves, don't seem too unduly worried at the way they're presently being tagged.

Kurdt Kobain: "It's fine, because we do play a lot of grunge, but we consider ourselves a bit more diverse than just full-out raunchy heavy music. We're aiming towards a poppier sound, and we've been into pop music for years; it's just when we were recording 'Bleach' we happened to be writing a lot of heavy songs at the time."

Chris Novoselic [bass]: "People ask when the Sub Pop thing is going to die away, like they're waiting for the backlash to start. It's probably going to die away when the bands break up, or start putting out lousy songs. Until then, you'll have to put up with us, I'm afraid."

Kurdt: "Right now Sub Pop has a lot of good things to look forward to. They've just released the Mudhoney album, Tad album, our album... it's going to be cool."

Right now, Nirvana are awesome live. The San Francisco show with Tad and Dickless is stunning: the Washington trio blow every other fucking band in existence off-centre with the potency and ferocious intent of their music. 'Love Buzz' and 'Stain' spiral and shatter, leaving precious shards of the purest manic pop thrill in their wake.

Chris trashes his bass out of petulance, Kurdt trashes his guitar not to be left out, and then trashes the drums. Meanwhile, our man Tad is standing left of the stage, looking distinctly worried. It's his bass Chris is now using. They encore, exploding with malice and annoyance at a crap PA system, leaving San Francisco's Gavin Report New Music Seminar in no doubt whatsoever as to quite who is happening where. The other shows sure ain't no couch potato fodder, either.

Do you like being on tour?

Chris: "Travelling is fun, and so is keeping yourself busy. Every night is like a

CHARLES PETERSON, COURTESY OF SUB POP RECORDS

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different party, for free. Every night is like Saturday night."

What do you do to while away the hours?

Chad Channing [drums]: "Listen to the stereo, sleep, spark up some asinine conversation, say whatever stupid things come into your mind."

Kurdt: "We've got this stupid record by a band called Witchcraft Coven, who had that hit in the '60s, 'Ode To Billy Jack' [actually Coven's 'One Tin Soldier (The Legend Of Billy Joe)'], and on its cover is a picture of the female singer lying naked on the altar, with the other members of the band holding daggers above her.

"On one side are sappy songs and on the other there's a Satanic sermon, which sounds like Bob Barker or some TV announcer saying stuff like "Kiss the goat", "Satan, Leviathan". So we turn that up really loud at intersections."

Chris: "We asked this guy for directions and just when we're about to drive off, Kurdt shouts out, 'Hail Satan!', and the guy goes 'Hey!' looks at me and goes, 'Never mind'."

Other stuff Nirvana listen to while touring are tapes by The Vaselines [they cover a Vaselines' song, 'Molly's Lips', live], Gong, The Fugs, Rolling Stones, Marine Girls... anything that isn't grungy, in fact. Their favourite on-the-road song is 'Me And You And A Dog Named Boo' by The Brady Bunch.

Nirvana have experienced similar problems to Tad at the towns they've visited.

Chris: "We played in San Jose, which was a shit-hole. We played in Sacramento which was a shit-hole. There was this guy in Sacramento called the Master Blaster, he's Sacramento's most hated DJ and we loved him. He was such a wiseass.

"This guy said something to him and he just went, 'Look at him, see why brothers and sisters shouldn't marry?' He goes 'One chromosome and there you have it: Down's Syndrome'. He just ran this guy ragged. He was DJing some mod party or other, and played this song called 'Morrissey Rides A Cock Horse', and they were gonna kill him."

Chris: "There's nothing going on in Phoenix, they're a bunch of rednecks. It's bad. All the oil-fields are in Texas, but they don't want to move from Arizona. It's a hell-hole."

What do you reckon to San Francisco?

Chris: "It's one of my favourite cities – the Roaring '20s art deco architecture, the climate, the vibe... My favourites are here and Rome. Too many cars, though."

You're telling me; earlier today the van we were in ran into some guy who jumped in front of us. Our female driver looked about 15, had no ID, no licence, no insurance, and it wasn't her van anyhow. We were let off with a caution. Chad is drinking orange juice and watching the cars go by in silence. Oh look, there go Dickless!

Typically, with the consummate bad taste "humour" of most American bands, upon arrival, Nirvana decided they should make fun of the local population in "the gay capital of the world".

Chris: "We've just been hanging out on Haight-Ashbury, killing hippies. We've been flipping off a lot of people, giving them our new attitude [Chad flips off with his finger straight up, nothing curled, the retard way]. Sometimes people will be walking down the sidewalk, and they'll hear "Kiss the goat" and see us flipping them off. We're going to get our asses kicked one day."

"Last night, we were waiting for Chad to come out of the house 'cos we were going to hang out at some gay bars, and Tad starts to pull out, and almost hit this other car. So this car stopped in front of us about 10 feet off and these two massive guys came out with their Yosemite lumberjack shirts on. They were just out to cruise, but for those 30 seconds we were really scared."

Every night on tour, Kurdt smashed up at least one guitar, often two. In Portland, it was because he was enjoying himself. In San Francisco it was because he hated the venue so much. In San Jose, it was sheer apathy. While making for an entertaining spectacle, one can't help feeling that if Nirvana continue this way they'll either a) degenerate into the realms of self-parody (as with The Who), b) run out of money or c) both. How on earth do they afford it?

Chris: "Well, we get some good deals. You see, we live in Tacoma, and things aren't so expensive there. In Seattle, people are really into old guitars, but in Tacoma they couldn't care less."

Kurdt: "Why do I do it? Why not? It feels good. Somebody already cut down a nice old tree to make that fucking guitar. Smash it! We only ever do it if the feeling's right; it doesn't matter where we are."

Chris: "Kurdt smashed this old Mustang in Pittsburgh in front of 20 people, because all 20 people started rocking out and grooving. We do it if the show's going really well, or real bad."

I wonder what Kurdt's idea of beauty is (I don't think I've ever wondered that before).

Kurdt: "Antique craftsmanship, something that is built well, to last, something solid. Values that my grandparents had – pretty much the opposite of the way things are going now. It's the same with music – sincerity, craftsmanship. If you're doing a job, you should do it well – that's just good business sense. Same thing my grandfather used to bitch at me about as a kid, and I never understood him.

"Why do I smash guitars? Why not?"

Kurt Cobain

"Our songs are about changing yourself, frustration. There was this anthem the skate-rock kids were claiming for their own, 'Don't Resist', to not resist against repression. 'No Recess', one of our new songs, was just some surreal idea I had about being in school and being in social cliques all the time, and then you grow up, having to deal with exactly the same things with your friends at parties and in clubs as you did in high school. It's exactly the same."

Does it feel kinda weird living where you do, in Aberdeen, Tacoma and Olympia (three small towns in Washington state), and then going out on tour? How do you cope with the contrast?

Kurdt: "I like the isolation, because it makes me appreciate being on tour more, I don't do very much at home at all, I stay in my apartment for weeks. It sure broadens your outlook, all the different attitudes you come across. We're getting fed up with this backwoods image kind of thing we're getting. It's like, you know there's an Aberdeen in every state in the US which is redneck, hillbilly. We're not unique."

Nirvana are currently recording with Butch Vig, the producer of Killdozer, for a new mini-LP, due out later this year on Sub Pop. It should be well worth the wait. ■

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Kurt's influences

6 Jad Fair Great Expectations

1989, Bad Alchemy

Kurt said: "With my headphones on Jad and I share our little secret walking through shopping malls and airports. I like to listen to Jad Fair and Half Japanese with headphones on walking around shopping malls, in the heart of American culture. I just think that if people could hear this music right now, they'd melt, they wouldn't know what to do, they'd start bouncing off walls hyperventilating. So turn up the music really loud and pretend it was blasting through the speakers on the mall."

▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED: 1974-1989 **▶RELEASE DATE:** 1989 **▶PRODUCERS:** Various **▶STUDIOS:** Various **▶HIGHEST UK CHART POSITION:** N/A **▶TRACKLISTING:** 76 songs including ▶Snake On My Head ▶Weee ▶Zombie Of Mora-Tau ▶I Heard His Footsteps Beat Against The Attic Floor I Knew My Time Had Come Don't You Want To Live Forever? Face Your Lord And Master. There Is No Escape. The Time Has Come. Nosferatu Is Among Us

FIVE FACTS

1 'Great Expectations' was a sprawling, double-album, 76-track compilation of Fair's work solo and with Half Japanese, with around 20 songs per side. The sleeve, like many of the vast array of albums he recorded, was produced by Fair himself.

2 Fair is renowned for playing a detuned guitar. "The only chord I know," he says, "is the one that connects the guitar to the amp."

3 With Half Japanese, Fair often sang about aliens or supernatural monsters – on 'Great Expectations' he included a stream-of-consciousness song about being held captive by Frankenstein.

4 Half Japanese are thought to be the first band ever to have released a triple debut album.

5 According to reports, Kurt Cobain died wearing a Half Japanese t-shirt.

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7

Shonen Knife
Burning Farm

1985, Zero Records

Kurt said: "When I finally got to see them live, I was transformed into a hysteric nine-year-old girl at a Beatles concert.

This was the first cassette that came out on K. Eventually, after a week of listening to it every day, I started crying. That's how much it affected me. I just couldn't believe that three people from a totally different culture could write songs as good as those, because I'd never heard any other Japanese music or artist who ever came up with anything good. Everything about them is just so fucking endearing. They're not too cute. That's part of the charm. Do I think there's a paedophiliac element to their appeal? I think, in Japanese culture in general there's a paedophiliac element – most of the women dress up as young girls. It's weird.

"I'm sure that I was twice as nervous to meet them as they were to meet us. I didn't want to offend or scare them in any way, because I know I'm a scruffy, slimy person who might scare them off – and that's exactly what I did. They were afraid of me. In fact, one of our first dates together, they saw me at the backstage area walking towards them and they screamed at the top of their voices, turned around and ran away from me, and then peeked their heads out their dressing room. I was trying to reassure them that I was harmless. The communication we had with them was deathly silence and a lot of smiling.

"In many ways, they're the ultimate K band, because they are sincere, they are real. They don't purposely put their guitars out of tune, and they don't purposely sing out-of-tune."

▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED: 1983 **▶RELEASE DATE:** July 21, 1983 **▶PRODUCERS:** Shonen Knife and Shin Hirakawa **▶HIGHEST UK CHART POSITION:** N/A **▶TRACKLISTING:** ▶1. Miracles, ▶2. Parallel Woman ▶3. Twist Barbie ▶4. Elephant Pao Pao ▶5. Tortoise Brand Pot Cleaner ▶6. Animal Song ▶7. A Day At The Factory ▶8. Burning Farm

FIVE FACTS

1 Shonen Knife's debut album 'Burning Farm' was originally released on Japanese label Zero Records in 1983 as an eight-track eight-inch vinyl.

2 K Records released a limited number of cassette versions of the album with an altered tracklisting, and it was this album Kurt picked up on.

3 On the original album, only one song was in English, 'Twist Barbie'.

4 'Twist Barbie' was mispelt on every pressing of the vinyl album as 'Twist Birbie'.

5 The band would go on to embrace metal and Motown on their second album 'Yama-no Attchan', which includes songs about insect collecting and riding bikes.

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Kurt's influences

Shonen Knife

Having been "transformed into a hysteric nine-year-old girl at a Beatles concert" by seeing them live, Japanese trio Shonen Knife were one of the greatest pop thrills of Cobain's life. Here, in 1992, NME legend Steven Wells met them to decide if their perfect cute-pop image was for real

NME
November 21, 1992

Shonen Knife are a pop phenomenon as hard, shiny, packaged and plastic as The Ramones, Sex Pistols, Betty Boo or Billy Idol. They are seamless, gleaming, impenetrable. They have distilled two entire decades into an almost perfect '90s image. From the '60s they have taken Battenburg cake, Mary Quant dresses, Boo-wigs, precision banality, knitting-catalogue voguing, Spectoresque high camp, Kathy Kirby provincial gawk and Herman's Hermits-ish Anglo-Saxon stiffness.

From the '70s they've taken the mock consumerism of X-Ray Spex, the camp modernism of Buzzcocks and, most important of all, the bizarre cartoon totalitarianism of The Ramones.

Although they are obviously flesh and blood, Shonen Knife, like the Ramones, offer to the world an image so perfect, so smooth, so devoid of crevices or footholds as to be somewhat freaky. They have erected a cool façade that slicker pop tarts have taken years and used the services of hundreds of highly trained publicists to achieve. They are more like The Archies or Josey And The Pussycats than any group of real human beings have a right to be.

The word perfect often crops up around Shonen Knife. Perfect pop, perfect image.

Although the hard women of L7 and Babes In Toyland have professed their love for Shonen Knife, others have not been so sisterly. While watching them from *The Word*'s hospitality lounge, a female music press employee curled her lip and snarled.

"It's obvious why men like them – cutesy little girls, unthreatening, unchallenging Barbie-doll bullshit. I mean, we've got Courtney Love, we've got Madonna, we've got Sinead O'Connor – do we really need a re-hash of 'Three Little Maids From School'? It's not irony, they mean it..."

Which can't possibly be true, can it?

If there's one thing that really bugs me about Shonen Knife, it's the lollipop jellybean dolly wolly gollygoshery. Oh, I know, typical bloody *NME* right-on bollocks. No doubt we'll discover that actually Shonen Knife are totally sussed pisstaking feminists...

"Feminism is," says Naoko Yamano after a brief consultation of her Japanese/English dictionary, "opposite, reverse discrimination. I have no interest in feminist question."

> ***"Feminism is reverse discrimination. I have no interest in feminist questions"*** ***Naoko Yamano***

You think women are the equal of men?

"Yes, of course."

That women should have control over their bodies and sexuality?

"Yes, they should have."

That women should be able to do with their lives whatever they want?

"Yes."

And without feminism you probably would all have ended up as housewives?

"OK, maybe we should study feminism, maybe we should read De Beauvoir..."

Is she taking the piss? The really startling thing is that Naoko could just throw the name of Simone De Beauvoir so casually in the conversation suggesting either that a) she's been ranted at on this subject before and been given a reading list, or b) the piss is exactly what she's taking.

When the first Shonen Knife record was played in the Creation office, it was greeted with a bemused and somewhat startled silence eventually broken by A&R man Dave Barker, who woofed, "They ROCK!"

Which is some kind of bottom line. They rock, they ride the tiger, they boot the donkey. They write exquisite buzzsaw moptop pop. So does anything else matter? Hell, yes! They are so superbly skilful in their multi-layering of pop imagery that one suspects them of sheer, calculated and unadulterated genius. Can Shonen Knife really be fab-4-real? Maybe it's all part of their masterplan. I was determined to be unsuckered by their ice cream niceness, firm in my resolve to ask some hard questions. But suckered I was, jellybeaned to a pulp I was, my hard questions left crushed, whimpering and dazed. I left with a headache and a sense of total impotence. I felt like I'd been pelted for two hours with plastic dolls' heads. Goddamn, these women are good!

Backstage at *The Word*. In a few hours the incompetent idiot American woman presenter will encourage slimeball Bernard Manning to make a racist remark about the Japanese. She will then "ambush" him by wheeling in two shy Japanese kids who don't speak English to sit on the couch next to Manning while he insults them with more racist remarks. This is what passes for "dangerous" TV in 1992.

When the Manic Street Preachers played Japan, they were constantly asked by Japanese journalists and record company employees to be ruder, to act more like real rock stars.

"I don't think we could be rude," claims Michie Yakatani. "Japanese people are not rude, we live too close..."

But moving in the circles of Anglo-American rock 'n' roll with its drug-fuelled hysteria, ego-mania, rock piggery...

"We have never seen such a thing."

How do you wish to be perceived?

"We are unique, we are all creators in Shonen Knife. Do you think we are stereotypes?"

English speakers find your lyrics amusing, how do you feel about that?

"Even in Japanese," says Naoko, "I do not have the ability to write beautiful ballads. We do not think too much about what we do. We just do what we are doing. There are many layers to our songs, they are very deep."

How would you describe yourselves?

"Rock star!"

Like Jimmy Page? Jimi Hendrix?

"No! Ozzy Osbourne! Yes!"

Do you think you'll always be polite or will life in the world of rock roughen you up?

"For ever. Whenever I am abroad I am very Japanese."

But you want to be a rock star, surely a polite rock star is a contradiction in terms?

"I like intellectual violence."

Beg pardon?

"Like The Beatles sometimes say things with irony, with some joke. We are very different from Japanese bands. Everybody is very polite but arrogant is very western."

What makes you really, really, really angry?

"When people throw trash on the road or park or something."

So what do you do if you see someone throwing trash? Do you run up to them and say, 'Hey, put that trash in a bin or take it home with you'?

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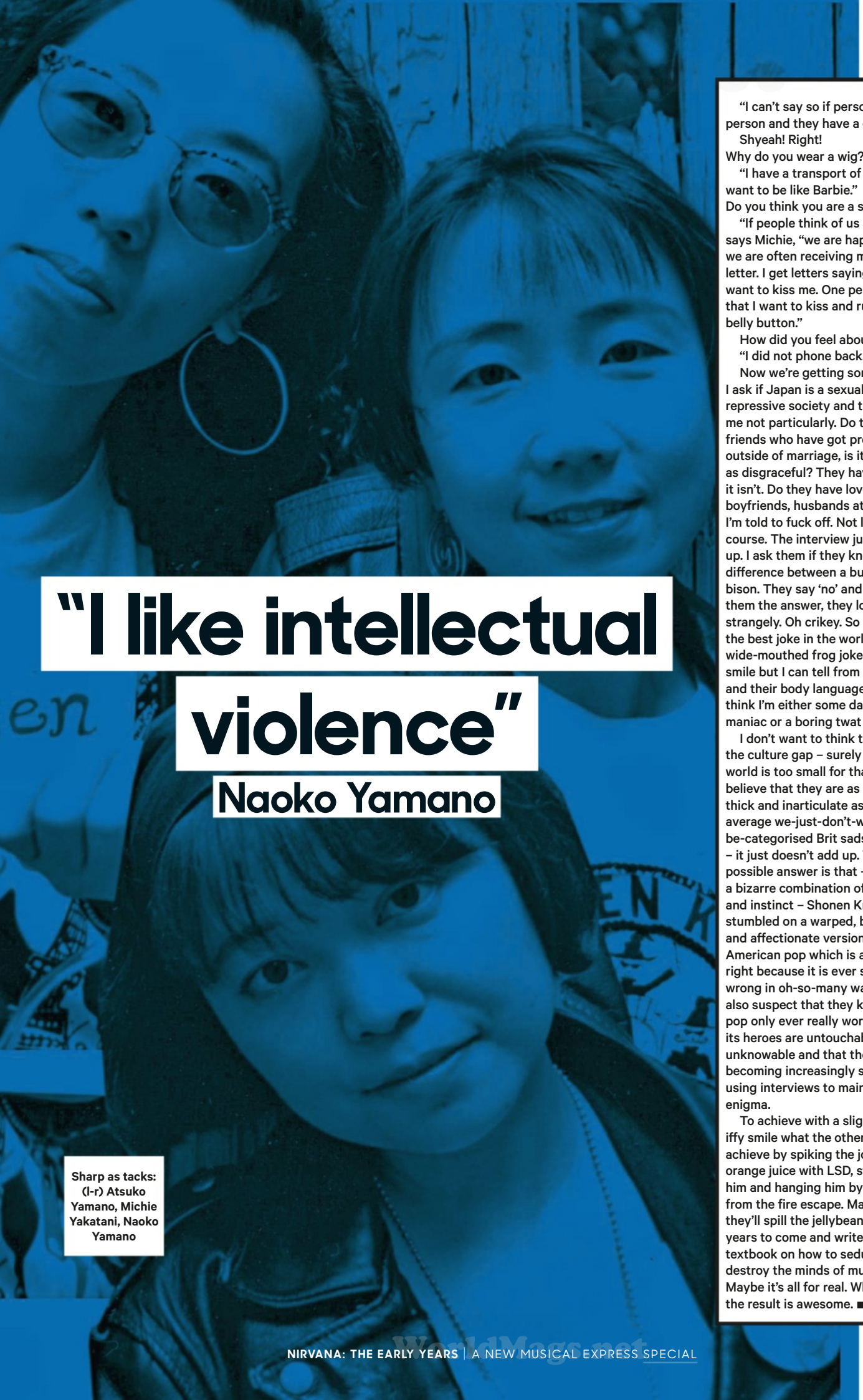

"I like intellectual violence"

Naoko Yamano

Sharp as tacks: (l-r) Atsuko Yamano, Michie Yakatani, Naoko Yamano

"I can't say so if person are bad person and they have a gun."

Shyeah! Right!

Why do you wear a wig?

"I have a transport of desire. I want to be like Barbie."

Do you think you are a sexy band?

"If people think of us as sexy," says Michie, "we are happy, but we are often receiving many fun letter. I get letters saying they want to kiss me. One person wrote that I want to kiss and rub your belly button."

How did you feel about that?

"I did not phone back."

Now we're getting somewhere. I ask if Japan is a sexually repressive society and they tell me not particularly. Do they have friends who have got pregnant outside of marriage, is it seen as disgraceful? They have and it isn't. Do they have lovers, boyfriends, husbands at home? I'm told to fuck off. Not literally, of course. The interview just dries up. I ask them if they know the difference between a buffalo and a bison. They say 'no' and when I tell them the answer, they look at me strangely. Oh crikey. So I tell them the best joke in the world – the wide-mouthed frog joke. They still smile but I can tell from their eyes and their body language that they think I'm either some dangerous maniac or a boring twat or both.

I don't want to think that it's the culture gap – surely the world is too small for that. I can't believe that they are as genuinely thick and inarticulate as the average we-just-don't-want-to-be-categorised Brit sadster band – it just doesn't add up. The only possible answer is that – through a bizarre combination of intellect and instinct – Shonen Knife have stumbled on a warped, brilliant and affectionate version of Anglo-American pop which is absolutely right because it is ever so slightly wrong in oh-so-many ways. I also suspect that they know that pop only ever really works when its heroes are untouchable and unknowable and that they are becoming increasingly skilled at using interviews to maintain the enigma.

To achieve with a slightly iffy smile what the other bands achieve by spiking the journalist's orange juice with LSD, stripping him and hanging him by his feet from the fire escape. Maybe they'll spill the jellybeans in years to come and write a textbook on how to seduce and destroy the minds of music hacks. Maybe it's all for real. Whatever, the result is awesome. ■

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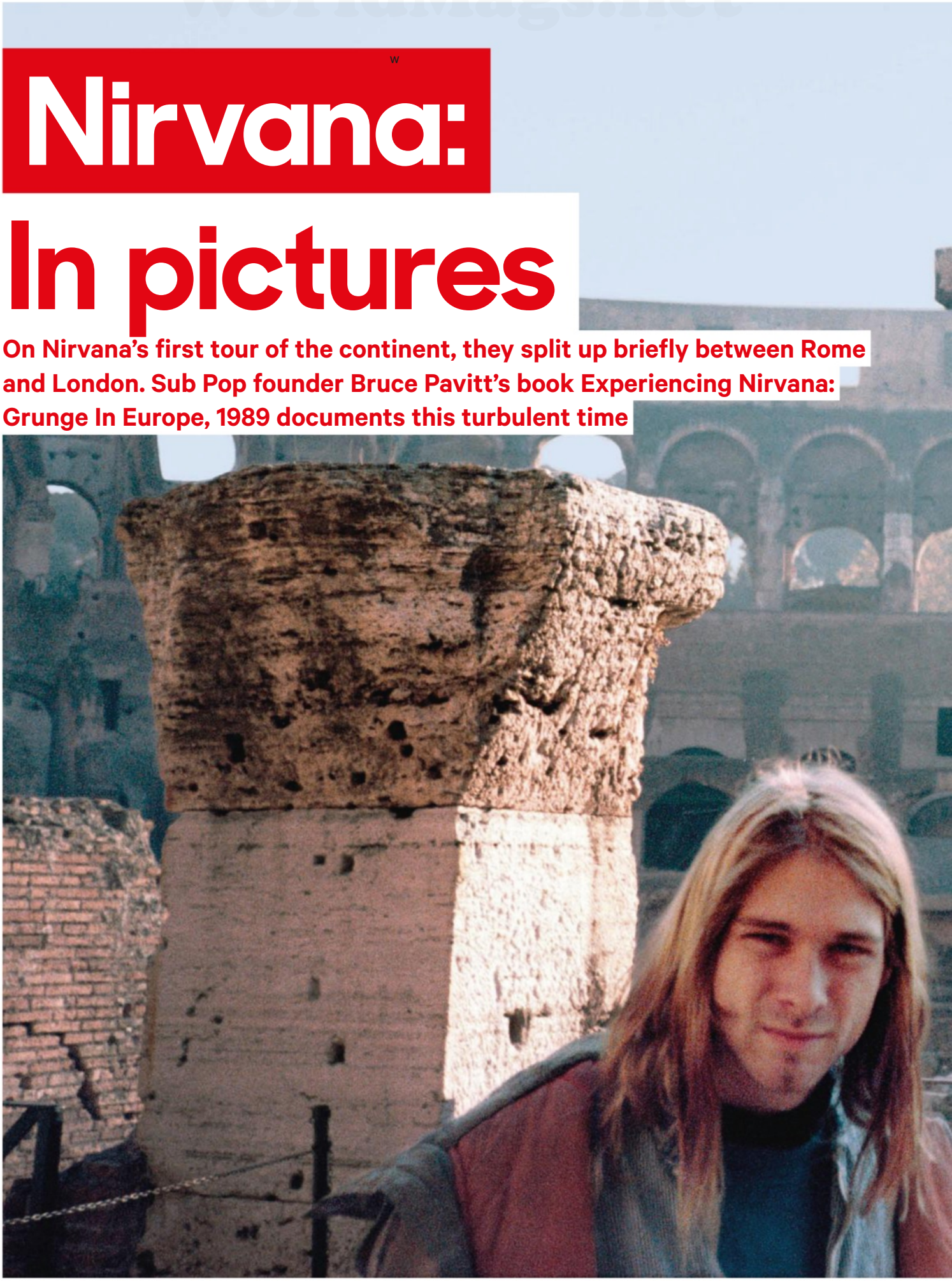
Nirvana:

In pictures

On Nirvana's first tour of the continent, they split up briefly between Rome and London. Sub Pop founder Bruce Pavitt's book Experiencing Nirvana: Grunge In Europe, 1989 documents this turbulent time



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Kurt at the Coliseum, Rome, November 28

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The London crowd at Lamefest UK, the Astoria, December 3

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Kurt and Krist headbang Lamefest UK into oblivion

Jonathan Poneman (right), Tad's Steve Wied and Kurt

Backstage at Rote Fabrik, Zurich

Kurt signs autographs at London's Rough Trade, December 4

Kurt and Mudhoney's Matt Lukin backstage at the Astoria

Excerpts from over 200 unseen photos featured in **EXPERIENCING NIRVANA: Grunge in Europe, 1989, by Bruce Pavitt.** Available wherever books are sold, or directly with limited metal badge and poster-size dustcover from *bazillionpoints.com/nirvana*. All photos by Bruce Pavitt.

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▶FROM THE ARCHIVE

"Good taste is the enemy of art"

Pablo Picasso

Swells vs Gru

"Fudge packin', crack smokin', Satan worshippin' motherfuckers"

Slogan on Nirvana T-Shirt

With grunge taking over the globe, NME sent legendary writer Steven Wells to dissect the scene, investigating everyone from letter's page superfans in Hertfordshire to Sub Pop founders and rising grunge hopefuls in Seattle. Here's what he discovered

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NME
January 4, 1992

"Vulgarity and bad taste are central to good music"
▲
John Peel

Something has gone horribly wrong. British pop groups – for so long the elite, the jolly pirates of global subculture – are currently represented to a sniggering world by sub-Mozzer suburban saps, mumbling mealy-mouthed mummies' boys, unassuming, uninteresting and unsexy, stunted, stilted and stagnant pop eunuchs who make Herman's Hermits sound like Hellbastard. The current crop of foppy mop-top shoeys are apathetic, afraid to rock, parochial and, worst of all, parent-friendly.

"If my mum came in my room and I was playing Unsane she'd go 'What is this horrible noise? Get it off!' If I was playing Lush she'd go, 'Oh, this is nice!' She'd actually like it!"

A look of genuine horror crosses the face of Chris Global, a Hertfordshire farm labourer with a degree in philosophy who has, for some months, been bombarding *NME* with furious letters attacking what he sees as the cancer of say-nothing niceness gnawing sloppily at the very heart of our allegedly 'alternative' music. The only cure, he says, is grunge – a staggering, swaggering, bourbon-drenched, raw-throated genre that owes something to hardcore, scum rock and metal sans the poodles and the hairdressers.

Grunge is primarily an American phenomenon. Its best proponents – Hole, Babes In Toyland, Calamity Jane (the more women in the band, the better the band. What an amazing coincidence!) –are noisy, articulate, cathartic and utterly pissed off, the total antithesis of shoey.

"I mean, that Lush interview, that really pissed me off! They don't even know why they're in a band! It's like a hobby thing, innit? Crap! At least the Manic Street Preachers want to change the face of pop music as we know it. You might as well, nobody else is going to do it for you..."

Bands like Unsane make music which is designed not to soothe pop's slightly fevered brow but to crush its skull. In Unsane's cathedral of ethereal sound, the font is full of foaming acid and the gargoyles drip venom from twisted mouths.

"If you're not angry, if you're not pissed off, then you're not going to make good music. Chapterhouse defend their right to have nothing to say and it comes through in their music. The Pain Teens sing about how shit work is. Grunge is about being frustrated – inarticulate rage and blind frustration."

Chris is best mates with Adrian Ashworth. Adrian works in an Our Price in Epsom, Surrey, and despite his shoey name, has persuaded them to open a grunge section – an oasis of UUUURGH! in a desert of simper.

"It's total shoe-gazing, it's Slowdive, it's Chapterhouse, Revolver, that's the shit that sells around here."

Are you advocating some kind of Pol Pot solution where all the shoeys are rounded up and re-educated to like good pop music?

"Ha! Yes, it would be for their benefit, after all. It's frustrating when someone asks for a Blur record..."

L7

And he makes "blur" sound like the violent vomiting of a very sick old man.

Why has this indie shit come back?

"I've got all the good baggy records, all five of them," admits Chris. "After baggy, you were looking round for what to buy and you bought 'Bleach' and The Boo Radleys. Things are so shite because people's expectations are so low and the music press aren't saying, "Look, this stuff is average."

"It should give you something," says Adrian. "Grunge at least challenges things, it's the sound of the rotting underbelly..."

Isn't there room for sweetness and light?

"No!" says Chris. "I'm getting laid off next week, I'm living at home, which I hate. The Tories are still in power, everything's SHIT. Ethereal, twee, jangly indie, shoe-gazing jingly-jangly shite says nothing to me, it's just complacent escapism..."

Rock began with the grinning, bouffanted, camp-as-sin, mascara-plastered, piano-wrecking loony Little Richard screaming sexy-as-five-partners-in-a-jacuzzi-shagging gibberish over a lighter-fuel-doused burning keyboard after backstage sex sessions with proto-groupies shared with his extremely well-hung mate, Buddy Holly. Enraged white racist parents stared in slack-jawed disbelief at this mutant, this insane creature from another planet: "This is the beast my daughter wants to screw!? This depraved, barbaric, voodoo jungle-monkey noise!"

The alternative on offer was Pat Boone: ugly, white, safe and prematurely middle-aged. A mewling marionette who filtered all that was noisy, loud, dangerous and bad out of rock for a scared white audience.

Boone's legacy lives on in shoey. Insipidity is a foul virus that has always lived in the belly of the rock beast, it is a disease. And, at the moment, grunge looks like the only possible cure...

"Look, I told you that Seattle sou to sound more S know what I'm s

Skid Row manager o

NME
July 18, 1992

"We are your trained dogs!" yaps Sub Pop media-manipulator Jonathan Poneman. "You tell us to bark and we go RUFF!"

The Dog House is the greasiest spoon this side of hell. A ketchup-spattered grebo anachronism in a city where even McDonalds sells fancy frothy coffee. A hamburger-flipper emerges from the khazi with more dead animal spattered over his grey apron than you'd find in Ted Nugent's chest freezer.

Overhead, a '50s sea-plane wheels in from over the snow-capped mountains and pine-fringed lakes. It buzzes over the downtown, with its blart and blur of bands blasting out from every available rehearsal space, over the flapping posters for sickfuck groups called Naked Aggression and The Gits. The centre of Seattle is a David Lynch film set dotted with long-haired teenage scum. A blue sports car roars out of the Dog House parking lot. A Limey hack is perched precariously on the rear ledge of the car. Slaphead beardo Sub Pop supremo Bruce Pavitt is hogging the only passenger seat.

"Bruce!" yells the hack. "Is there any truth in the rumour that when N****** first got signed, you screamed blue murder, but that since you got so much money out of the deal you're now desperate to get the entire roster signed and retire rich?"

"Ah-HAH!" laughs Bruce, loudly. "There's, urm, an element of truth in that."

This dinky little town, perched in the top left-hand corner of the USA, 240 million light years equidistant from the burnt-out jittering shitholes of blasé LA and neurotic New York, is roaring drunk on hype. Since Sub Pop released their first single – Green River's 'Dry As A Bone' in 1987 – the label has become synonymous with feisty, fighting post-hardcore fun punk rock. Seattle has the feeling now of a city alive with youth culture. But why here? In *Rolling Stone*, Mark Arm of Mudhoney put it down to "the two Is – isolation and in-breeding". And, he might have added, two people to make it happen.

Take it as given that mid-'80s Seattle and the surrounding area contained more than its fair share of brilliant bands. But what made it click, fizzle and finally explode? Sub Pop. A label run by probably the only two Americans in the world who understand punk rock (remember, this is a country where they really care, where they're furious that Milli Vanilli didn't sing on their own records). The Sub Pop boys realised something that US hardcore punk had long forgotten – that it's showbiz, hype, a scam, and that packaging is at least as important as the product.

"That was always amazing to me," says Jonathan. "Some of our early singles were fucking amazing, but, frankly, some of them were pretty duff and it was really astounding to me that people never really made that differentiation in their minds."

"Not only did we put an emphasis on design," adds Bruce, "but on consistency of design, à la Postcard or Blue Note. I mean, this was very key and if they liked the Mudhoney records and there was hype on Mudhoney and there was another record that came out that kinda looked similar, then people would automatically pick that up. It's the oldest scam in the book. I'll never forget working in a small record store and having people coming in and paying exorbitant money for anything on Postcard Records. Why? Because they had to have the whole

CHARLES PETERSON, COURTESY OF SUB POP RECORDS

! Get me und. I want it Seattle, you saying?"

n the phone home

Dwarves' 'Blood Guts & Pussy' and Green River's 'Dry As A Bone'

fucking set. That never left me. That big light bulb just went off. People in this city have always watched what goes on in England..."

The Sub Pop boys are intellectual rednecks frolicking like puppies in the triangular no-man's land between the "rockist, sexist, homophobic" hell-world of metal, the "politically correct fascism" of the US punk scene and "pretentious British indie pop".

"I mean, you mustn't analyse it too much," says Jonathan. "It would have been really terrible to have some sociologist sitting down asking Elvis Presley what his political beliefs were before you start working with him. To a certain degree, there's the element of the noble savage."

Thus the studied offensiveness of the cocks-out Dwarves calling a record 'Blood, Guts & Pussy' or 'Thank Heaven For Little Girls'. More than a few of the Sub Pop bands who come across on record and in interviews as sleazed-out, shotgun-toting, Bud-chugging bitch-slapping Neanderthals turn out to be, when you meet them, awfully nice people. The Supersuckers are wont to say things like "Shit, we were so bad at school that we kicked our own ass."

Earth, meanwhile, are "the most hated band in Seattle". The Swans-ish, uncompromisingly grim, bass-heavy, bleak and lyric-less music viciously goes against the perceived Sub Pop sound – thus making them the ideal Sub Pop band. More than any other band, they blatantly relish the concept of intellectual redneckism. The name was chosen because Dave and Dylan Earth were reading a lot of "neoplatonic philosophy".

"We target-shoot, we're both into firearms, fishing, some painting every now and then – minimalist monochromatic canvases, found objects, teeth, lots of teeth... There's too many earthies, beardies and hippies in this town... Pearl Jam must be stopped. With a .22 calibre behind the ear, if needs be..."

"I think that explains a lot," says Bruce. "Like Mudhoney, they're educated, but they do everything they can to come off as these dumb beer-drinkers. If you get outside of Seattle it's logging communities, it's fishing communities. N****** came from Aberdeen, Washington, which is an incredibly small fishing community – it's a lot of that mix between the redneck and the yuppie, the friction really worked. When I think of Tad or Kurt Cobain or these other working-class artists, I really see, like, Mark E Smith as almost a model."

There's a punk playfulness that separates Sub Pop from other labels, which is perhaps why they booked their New Music Seminar showcase gig into a New York gay club. It's a sense of fun that is reflected in Sub Poppers Six Finger Satellite. They claim to be massive fans of Gary Numan and to hate everyone else on Sub Pop.

Soundgarden

"Those bands suck. They're stuck in the early '70s and we're new wave."

"I went to England once for the great pot and disco," claims singer Jeremiah. They rant at great lengths about the cocaine-like drug "gleon".

"When Jonathan came to sign us, he brough four ounces. He's a gleon fiend, man, he's crazy, he's insane! He trashed Chris' house. He stayed in the corner all nervous until the girls went, and then he went crazy! He picked up the record player and screamed 'I'm gonna kill ya, ya piece of shit!'"

A story, which if it contains even a smidgeon of truth (and I'm assured, drugs aside, it does) is the first known instance of a record company trashing a band's house.

Irony is lost on a lot of Americans, and Sub Pop know when they have to draw the line. Their distinctive black and white logo has been stolen and adapted dozens of times, but a flyer advertising a "DISCO SUCKS" event, with its racist, homophobic and dumb rockist overtones, really pissed them off.

"I'm an arrogant fucking snob," claims Bruce. "OK, I'll put my cards on the table. It's just these two separate camps, the indie rock camp and the metal camp, and everybody in the metal camp was making tons of money and everybody in the indie camp wasn't making any money. But the indie people, they were wittier, they've got more to say, but why can't these people make any money? Our greatest success was looting the coffers of the metal industry. I know I'm sounding really cynical here, but we've basically convinced a lot of the people within the metal industry that what we have is heavy metal. It's a transfer of resources."

"And that's what you've got to do!" barks an agitated Jonathan, quietly. "You've got to constantly irritate – that's what pop culture is about! Absorbing different symbols and placing them in a new concept. So when Mudhoney came over to England and had long hair and started banging their heads, it's like 'Is this some metal band?' It was a little confusing. You borrow the best. People leave going, 'What's going on?', and that's vital..."

Look, you want to know why Sub Pop are cool? Because they're the Tamla Motown of punk. Because they do a T-shirt that says "LOSER". Because they fucked up at every stage on this trip and they said sorry and gave us the money. Because they know that punk is an adjective and never a noun. Because this is the label that gave you Lubricated Goat. Because they are Americans who understand, who are able to accommodate Mark E Smith (the hero of US grunge), Fast Records and Alan McGee and Tony Wilson and see what is utterly glorious in the decadent banality of the evil enemy, heavy metal. They are dumbfuck punk entrepreneurs with the suss and savvy of radical artists and the luck of Satan.

About

Deep into writing the follow-up to 'Bleach', Nirvana suddenly found themselves in need of a new drummer. Enter one of rock's most legendary backseat drivers. Louis Pattison delves into the Origins Of Dave...

Henry Rollins, Ian MacKaye, Bob Mould... all on the same stage. Monday, May 31, 2010, the 30th anniversary concert of Washington's 9:30 Club, is a night which none of the 1,200 hardcore punk fans in attendance will forget any time soon. This space – since 1996 located at the old site of the WUST Radio Music Hall rather than the 930 F Street address that, along with the old opening time, gives it its name – is a truly important place in the genesis of punk rock, DC hardcore and alternative music in general. You only have to ask the hush-hush special guest.

"The first time I played at 9:30 Club, I was about 15 or 16 years old," he tells the crowd by way of introduction. "I was in a band called Dain Bramage, and we played here. That night, one of my drumming heroes – a guy called Reed Mullin from a band called Corrosion Of Conformity – was in the audience. After soundcheck, he came up to me and said, 'You guys are kind of good. You wanna put out a record?' He hooked us up with a guy who had a record label called Fart Blossom and I made my first album. So thank you very much 9:30 Club!"

Following on from the one-man performance of his →

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a Grohl

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current, stadium-filling band's greatest song, 'Everlong', Dave Grohl then invites onstage his old band mates from local hardcore legends Scream (minus guitarist Franz Stahl). They play their own song 'Choke Word', and then proceed to take on two songs by an even more seminal Washington punk band, Bad Brains. The first is 'At The Atlantis'; then comes 'Stay Close To Me': B-side to Bad Brains' first single 'Pay To Cum', which was released in 1980. It's the high point on a night that – as the *Washington Post* puts it – gives everyone walking out of the venue "some serious bragging rights".

Being as he is just 11 years old at the time, David Eric Grohl does not buy the above-mentioned single when it first comes out. No, in 1980 and into the year after, the young Springfield, Virginia resident is still feeding off the classic rock-heavy record collection that's been introduced into the family home by his mother's new man. He loves Led Zep, Jethro Tull, The Grateful Dead and especially The Beatles. Noticing her son's new-found love, Virginia Grohl decides to go out and buy Dave a Silvertone guitar, a little amp and a Fab Four songbook.

"I used to just sit down and play along with all their songs," he remembers. "Not because I wanted to be in The Beatles or because I wanted to be a rock star. It was just my favourite thing in life to do – to sit down and play my guitar, to just play these songs. From there on in that's all I was doing."

Playing in bands inevitably follows. Nothing serious: just fast, fun covers – 'Louie Louie' and suchlike – blasted through by 13-year-old kids at parties, backyards, wherever. It's only when Dave and his sister spend the summer of 1982 at his cousin's house in Evanston, Illinois, that his passion becomes focused.

"We got there, and my Aunt Sherry goes, 'Tracy, they're here. Come downstairs!'" he says of this fateful first meeting. "Then I hear this 'chink, chink, chink,' coming down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairs I see she has chains on and bondage pants and combat boots. I'm like, 'Oh, she's punk.'"

Dave is not wrong about Tracy Bradford. At 16, she is by now totally and utterly immersed in the punk-rock scene. Two years previously, she became a singer of her own band, Verboten. As well as playing gigs in Chicago's proper grown-up punk venues, the stupidly young quartet even managed to bluff their way on Saturday morning TV show *Kidding Around*, playing two of their own songs: 'Slumpshot' and 'My Opinion'.

"I would use a chair as a hi-hat and the bed as toms and cymbals"

Dave Grohl

Dain Bramage at Ashbourne Community Centre, Burke, VA

As the guitarist Jason – staggeringly, a mere 10 years old at the time – remembers: "She just knew a ton of people on the scene. It was her who said, 'OK... well, I'm sort of friends with the Dead Kennedys, so let's get a band and put out a single.' She was quite the charmer, and people really took to her."

That summer, one more person is falling under both her spell and punk rock's. Her cousin sits in her room for hours on end as she plays seven-inch after seven-inch. She takes him out to shows. A few weeks later, Dave Grohl returns home an avid reader of San Francisco-based underground fanzine *Maximumrocknroll*, now well aware of who Bad Brains are, and referring to himself as a punk. He tries to give himself a Black Flag tattoo, which he will mention to Henry Rollins years later as that 30th anniversary show for the club that shaped him.

To put it simply in Dave's own words, "I was totally converted."

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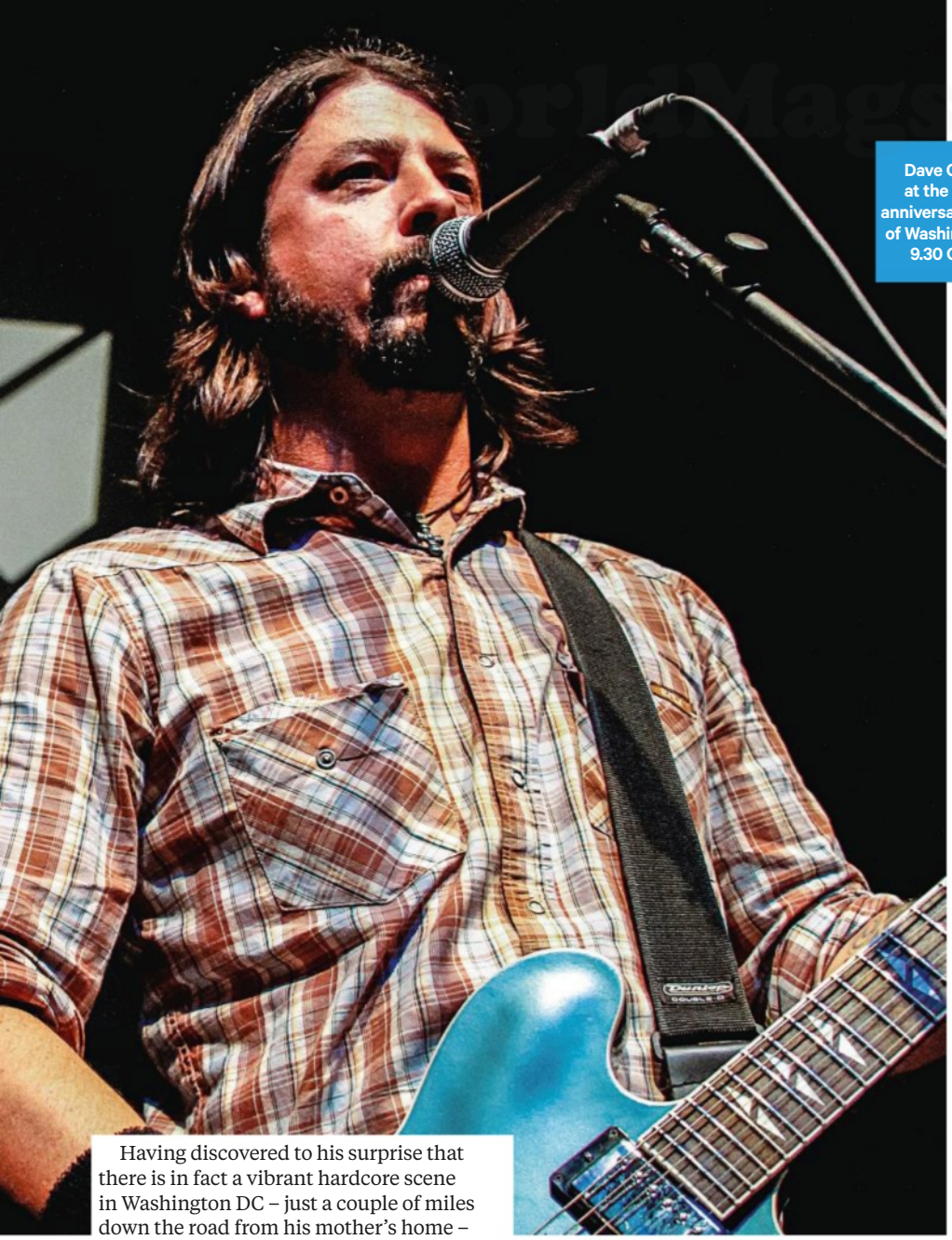


Dave Grohl at the 30th anniversary bash of Washington's 9.30 Club

Having discovered to his surprise that there is in fact a vibrant hardcore scene in Washington DC – just a couple of miles down the road from his mother's home – Dave Grohl doesn't waste any time making himself part of it. It is the time of Minor Threat, SOA and Faith – local bands who will go on to provide the template for the entire US underground punk scene.

"That scene really instilled that DIY ethic," Dave notes. "It was totally independent and underground. As well as a band, I had a fanzine, I traded tapes. By 1984 I was immersed in it."

The band of which he speaks are Freak Baby, who he joins on second guitar having met bassist Brian Samuels at a local gig. "We played a few school shows and made a demo," Dave says. "We convinced the local record store, Smash, to sell our cassettes and managed to gain a following of four or five local skinheads."

It is only six months later when the now-four-piece realise they're onto something. The band is now called Mission Impossible, and Dave is sat down. By this point, driven on to further listening extremes – Venom, Motörhead, Slayer – he's decided that drums are the instrument on which he'll express himself from now on.

"In my bedroom, I had a chair that was next to my bed," he explains of how he discovered and began mastering his new passion. "I would kneel down on the floor and put a pillow between my legs to use as my snare. I would use the chair to my left as the hi-hat and use the bed as toms and cymbals. I'd put on Minor Threat's 'Out Of Step', Bad Brains' 'Rock For Light' and Rush's '2112'. I'd play along to those records until there was sweat literally dripping off the windows."

When Dave finally gets a kit, his abilities do not go unnoticed by the DC hardcore scene. Ian MacKaye – of Minor Threat, soon to be of Fugazi and co-founder of Dischord Records – has been told by everyone that he has to see this 16-year-old prodigy. Eventually he does and, like everybody else, is blown away by the sheer power, speed and aggression of his playing, describing him as "maniacal".

It's at this point that Dain Bramage enter the picture, having formed out of the ashes of Mission Impossible. A three-piece featuring Reuben Radding, MI's David Smith and Dave Grohl on drums, they write seven songs in one rehearsal and are offered a deal to put out an album, 'I Scream Not Coming Down', after Dave's first show at the 9:30 Club. But it doesn't last long. Their music, drawing from the experimental post-punk sounds of Television and Mission Of Burma, is not amazingly received.

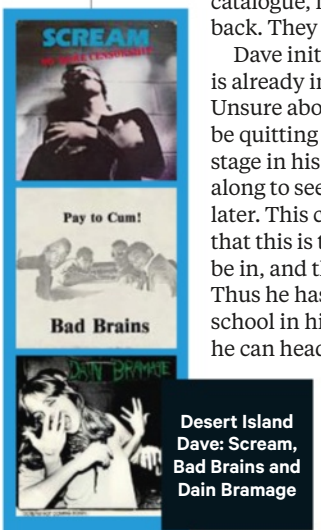
And anyway, Dave Grohl has had his head turned, while buying drumsticks, by a card on the bulletin board of his local music store. It reads: 'Scream: looking for a drummer.'

Having formed six years earlier, by '87 Scream have released three albums and are firmly established on the DC hardcore scene. The music is more advanced than many of their contemporaries, drawing from classic rock and funk.

With these influences and actual singing, some initially deride Scream for being "a rock'n'roll covers band" – "We did have a song called 'Search & Destroy'," bassist Skeeter Thompson later tells a fanzine – but Dave Grohl is not one of them. He first sees them in 1983, shortly after his revelatory summer with his punk-rock cousin, and is in awe from the very start. "They were so fucking good," he says. "And when I discovered they were from Virginia like me, they became my heroes".

Grohl remains a diehard fan while the purists scoff at their rock classicist tendencies, and is further impressed by their progress. In summer of 1986, Scream embark on a mammoth tour of Europe – no mean feat for a punk band at this point. There's a sense among some that they are meant for bigger things than the DC hardcore scene. So when they return that year, drummer Kent Stax quits to spend more time with his kid and that advert goes up, Dain Bramage's drummer is forced to make a tough decision.

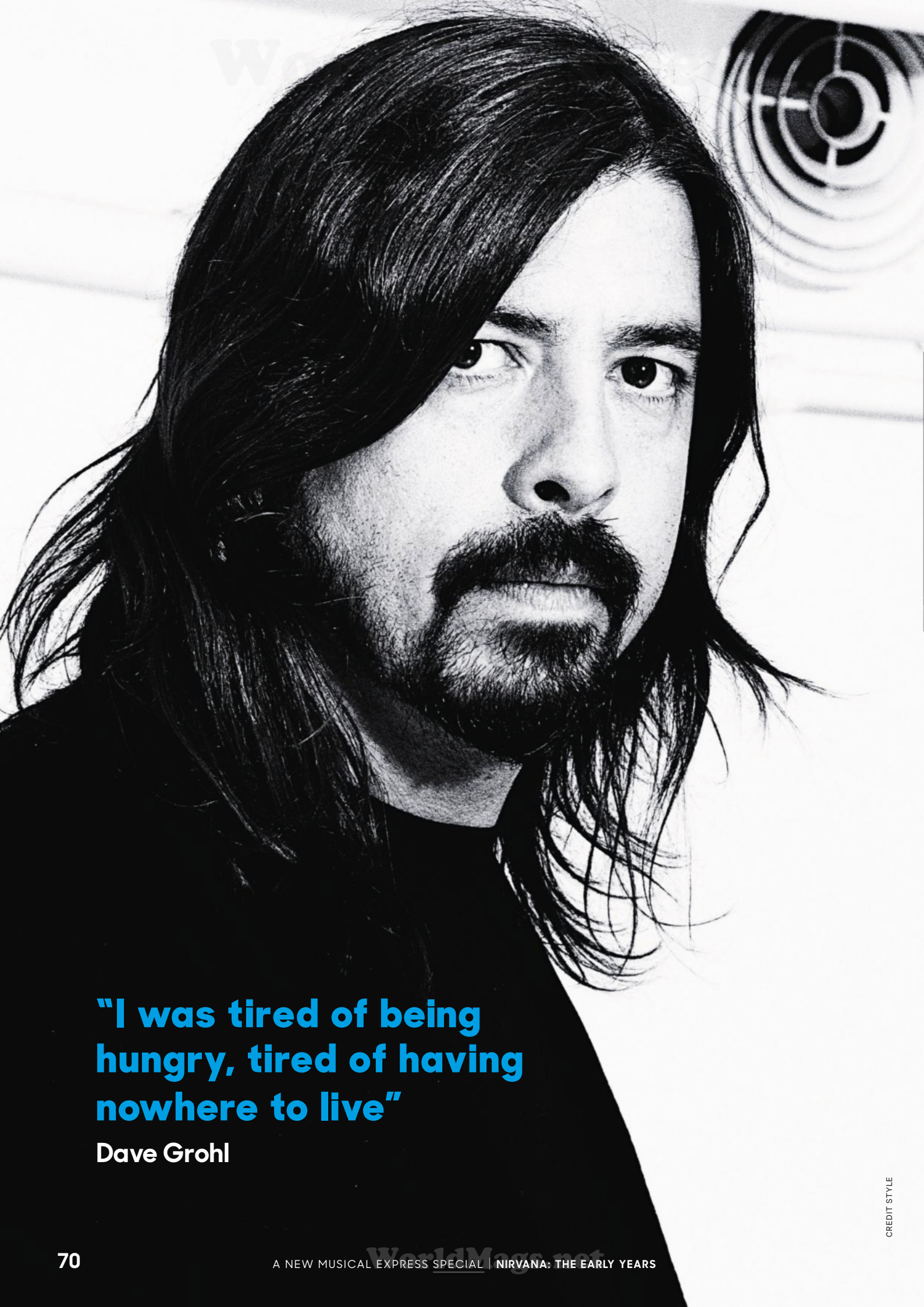
"I called the number," Dave recalls. "I had to lie about my age because I was only 17 at the time, but I spoke to Franz and he asked me to come meet him at their basement. I got there, and he asks me if I want to play some covers – AC/DC, Zeppelin – and I said, 'No. let's play your songs.' I knew all their songs anyway. We ran through their whole fucking catalogue, note for note, front to back. They asked me to join."



Desert Island Dave: Scream, Bad Brains and Dain Bramage

Dave initially explains that he is already in a band, and so can't. Unsure about whether he should be quitting high school at this stage in his life, Dave Grohl goes along to see Scream play a month later. This confirms it for him – that this is the band he wants to be in, and the life he wants to live. Thus he has to drop out of high school in his senior year, so that he can head on tour – first to the south-east US, then Europe.

Initially, he loves every single minute of it. His first show with the band is →



"I was tired of being hungry, tired of having nowhere to live"

Dave Grohl

CREDIT STYLE

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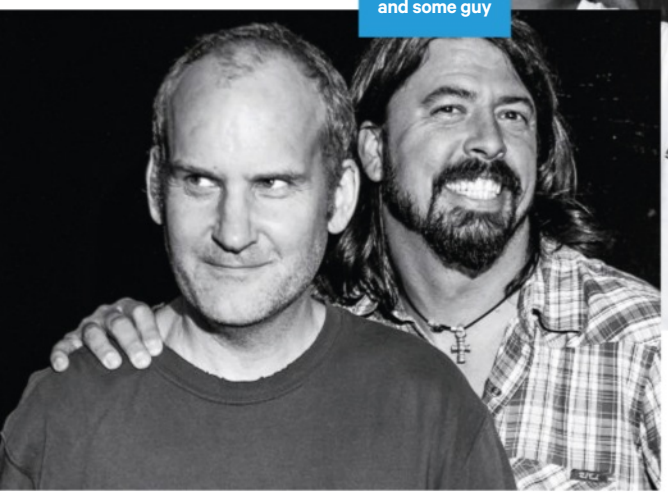
Fugazi's Ian Mackaye (above left) Black Flag's Henry Rollins, and some guy

Dave with his former Scream bandmates



ED SIRRS/CAMERA PRESS, DEAN CHALKLEY, DAVE BARNHOUSER COURTESY OF 9:30 CLUB

an Amnesty International benefit, after which the audience march on the embassies of countries known for human rights violations; he makes the album 'No More Censorship'; Scream tour America five times and Europe three, and in every town, there is always a squat to sleep in, always a grateful fan or promoter to provide some food, always a couple of beers here or there. But the problems are not far off. The drugs; the getting home to find that they've been evicted. The sense that maybe they'd missed their window, that things were not going to get better.

"You can only eat so much bad food," Dave Grohl shrugs. "I was only 20, but I was starting to question if this was how I wanted my life to be. I was tired of having nothing, tired of being hungry, tired of having nowhere to live."

These feelings unhappily coincided with the demise of a band he'd once been in awe of. On a sparsely attended tour in 1990, Scream pull into LA, and bassist Skeeter Thompson disappears.

This is not uncommon – short-term replacements had often been drafted in. Plus, reportedly, he has a spiralling drug addiction. Possessions and equipment are always going "missing".

The official reason for his departure is "girlfriend trouble". But whatever, it doesn't really matter: the point is that Scream are now stuck in California with no money. In what Pete Stahl will remember as "a depressing time", the remaining members spend a month with Stahl's sister in Laurel Canyon, and come to terms with that fact it might well be all over. Dave busies himself with drinking free beer and helps tile the floor of his friend's coffee shop.

One day, he notices that The Melvins, with whose singer Buzz Osborne he bonded when they shared a bill in San Francisco, are due to play in Los Angeles soon. He calls up his old pal, on the blag for a pass to the show, and begins telling him about the plight of his band, and how depressed about it all he is.

As it turns out, this will be the phonecall that changes his life.

Like Spinal Tap, Nirvana had always had their problems with drummers. They'd started out in 1985 with Aaron Burckhard who, as well as frequently skipping practices and generally winding up his band mates, manages to get Kurt Cobain's car impounded after a fight with a police officer. His replacement is Dale Crover, who had previously played bass with Kurt in Fecal Matter – he plays on the first Nirvana demo in Seattle. Unfortunately, he is actually in the Melvins, and is merely helping out.

In what turns out to be a bad move, he recommends a guy called Dave Foster. Dave can play, but also lives hours away and, after having his driving license revoked for assault on the Mayor of Cosmopolis' son, has to be picked up by Kurt and Krist for each practice. Foster discovers he's out only when he sees an advert for Nirvana in support of Butthole Surfers that he doesn't know anything about.

With the recording of their debut single and album for Sub Pop impending, Chad Channing is drafted in. Playing on most of 'Bleach', he makes it as far as the first sessions with Butch Vig in April 1990 (his version of 'Polly' appears on 'Nevermind'), but falls out with Kurt when he insists on taking more of an active role in the band's songwriting.

At some point during all of this, Krist and Kurt had attended a Scream show and had been "blown away" by the sheer power and volume of the drummer. Privately, they agreed that if they ever got the chance, they should get him to join Nirvana. Now, in September of 1990, having been given Krist's number by Buzz Osborne, he's on the phone.

"We just talked about music," Dave says of that fateful first conversation. "There was a common ground, and it felt pretty compatible. I went out and bought a copy of 'Bleach', and played it 10 times. I just packed up my kit and flew up to Seattle."

Greeted by two guys who, as he puts it, "looked like dirty fucking biker children", Dave Grohl is surprised by just how sweet and accommodating Cobain and Novoselic are. On September 22, 1990, Nirvana have a show booked at the Motorsports International Garage. Dave goes along. On drums that night is Nirvana's fifth drummer: Dan Peters of Mudhoney, who has just played on single 'Sliver'. In the 14-song set that evening are two songs – opener 'Stay Away', 'In Bloom' – that are destined for the second Nirvana album. Dave in fact spends a lot of the set outside talking to a friend, but what he sees is enough. And besides, it's not like he has a huge amount of options.

Three days later, he officially auditions with Nirvana. It takes two minutes for Krist Novoselic and Kurt Cobain to realise that this is their guy – he plays hard and, importantly, can sing back-up vocals. Dave Grohl plays his first ever show with Nirvana on October 11, 1990, and finds himself in a band who are at the forefront of the alternative explosion.

In an interview with *Melody Maker* conducted during their tour of the UK in the autumn, Dave says that one of the best things about being in Nirvana "is the fact that more and more major record companies are taking the band out to dinner to discuss a possible deal". For the hardcore kid who used to drum on a pillow in his bedroom, the starving days are over. ■

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Kurt's influences

8

Young Marble Giants

Colossal Youth

(1980, Rough Trade)

Kurt said: "Lying in an iron lung filled with lukewarm water and Epsom salts. This music relaxes you, it's total atmospherics. It's just nice, pleasant music. I love it. The drum machine has to have the cheesiest sound ever. We're going to be on a Young Marble Giants compilation, doing 'Credit In The Straight World'. I had a crush on the singer for a while – didn't everyone? I didn't know much about – the Moxham brothers, right? I heard they might be getting back together again recently. Isn't it weird when you hear something like that, you still get excited, even though you know you shouldn't? I first heard 'Colossal Youth' on the radio, after I started getting into K [Records] music when I lived in Olympia."

▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED: 1979, **▶RELEASE DATE:** February 1980 **▶PRODUCERS:** Young Marble Giants, Dave Anderson **▶STUDIO:** Foel, Welshpool **▶HIGHEST UK CHART POSITION:** N/A **▶TRACKLISTING:** ▶1. Searching For Mr. Right ▶2. Include Me Out ▶3. The Taxi ▶4. Eating Noddemix ▶5. Constantly Changing ▶6. N.I.T.A. ▶7. Colossal Youth ▶8. Music For Evenings ▶9. The Man Amplifier ▶10. Choci Loni ▶11. Wurlitzer Jukebox ▶12. Salad Days ▶13. Credit In The Straight World ▶14. Brand - New - Life ▶15. Wind In The Rigging

FIVE FACTS

1 Kurt's wife, Courtney Love, shared his enthusiasm for Young Marble Giants, covering their 'Credit In The Straight World' on her band Hole's second album 'Live Through This'.

2 'Colossal Youth' cost a mere £1000 to record over three-and-a-half days – positively extravagant by Nirvana's standards.

3 Both the band and the album were named after early Greek 'kouroi' statues of naked young men, which also pop up in rock history on the sleeve of David Bowie's side-project Tin Machine's 'Tin Machine II'.

4 The band have reunited to play live several times since 2003, most notably at the ATP festivals, and new material is reportedly in the offing.

5 Other famous YMG fans include REM's Peter Buck, The Magnetic Fields' Stephin Merritt, Adam Green, Belle & Sebastian and Galaxie 500.

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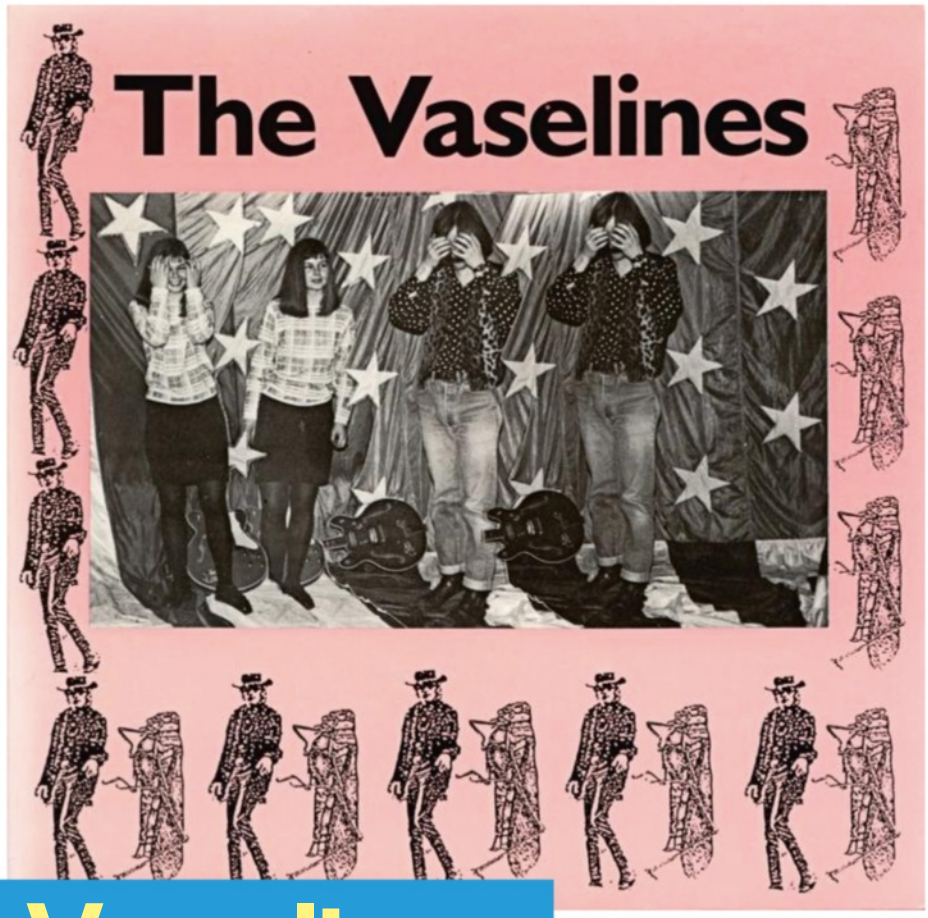

9

The Vaselines
Dying For It

(1988, 53rd & 3rd)

Kurt said "Eugene + Francis = documented love. I just have this feeling they had a really cool relationship. I don't know if that's true or not, but I just think it's a really amazing thing when a couple can get together and write some of the most beautiful songs I've ever heard. They're kind of sharing their life with people. Eugene and Francis are the Captain & Tennille of the underground.

"Could I imagine myself and Courtney ever doing something like that? Absolutely. We play together all the time. Musically, we're compatible, because we think exactly the same and we feel the same, and it's really easy to come up with good music if you're like that. If I could just have a romantic relationship with Chris and Dave, it would be nice. I have no definite plans to release the stuff with Courtney, but it's a nice idea. Maybe we'll do it some day, but we have too many things to do right now. Just playing together in our house is satisfying."

▶THE DETAILS

▶RECORDED: October 1987 **▶RELEASE DATE:** March 1988 **▶PRODUCER:** Stephen Pastel **▶STUDIO:** Pierhouse Studios, Edinburgh **▶HIGHEST UK CHART POSITION:** N/A **▶TRACKLISTING:** ▸1.Dying For It ▸2. Molly's Lips ▸3. Teenage Superstars ▸4. Jesus Wants Me For A Sunbeam

FIVE FACTS

1 'Molly's Lips', as covered by Nirvana on 1992's 'Incesticide', was a tribute to Scottish actress Molly Weir, who played Hazel the McWitch in BBC children's programme *Rentaghost*.

2 Krist Novoselic joined a reformed Vaselines to perform on 'Jesus Wants Me For A Sunbeam' at Seattle's Bumbershoot festival in September 2012.

3 'Dying For It' was an EP; The Vaselines' first album, 'Dum-Dum' was released in 1989, with a My Bloody Valentine-rivalling 21-year delay until 2010's 'Sex With An X'.

4 Nirvana also covered 'Jesus Wants Me For A Sunbeam', pessimistically renamed 'Jesus Don't Want Me For A Sunbeam', for their 1993 MTV Unplugged performance, where Kurt jokingly refers to it as "a rendition of an old Christian song". It is in fact a parody of the children's hymn 'I'm A Sunbeam'.

5 The Vaselines' Eugene Kelly joined Nirvana onstage at Reading Festival in 1991 to perform 'Molly's Lips'.

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Kurt's influences

The Vaselines

Kurt's "most favourite songwriters in the whole world", The Vaselines found huge underground acclaim after Nirvana covered their songs 'Molly's Lips' and 'Son Of A Gun'. But back in 1988, they were just a young couple from Glasgow making filthy teenage pop music. NME's James Brown met them to talk incest, Vanessa Paradis' breasts and kidnapping

NME
April 2, 1988

Like greased bohemian pick-pockets they nipped into my heart and stole a small chunk of it. In its place they left two EPs of careless Sindy Pop that was as camp as a boy scouts' outing. Who? The Vaselines, Frances McKee and Eugene Kelly, from Glasgow. Classic lovers, they are flirtatious, saucy and perversely attractive, and behind their fiery lip there's substance not shit. If I told them the flat Kenneth Halliwell murdered Joe Orton in was up for sale they'd fly down and buy it with a back-log of unspent giros. If I told them the drinks were on the *NME* and they had a licence to fib they would fly to a bar and return with stories as tall as their whiskies. In fact they did.

"Eugene was a dancer in a real seedy strip bar in town," gabbles Frances. "He had to perform topless in a grass skirt with gold lamé shells over his nipples. It was really sad because he hasn't got very nice legs. His ankles aren't bad though, and all these visiting businessmen would go and leer at him. I just went in there one day and rescued him."

So there's a big gay scene in Glasgow, Eugene?

"Not as big as I'd like it to be. Mind you, once this guy came up to me at the train station and said 'Do you want to earn a fiver?' and somehow I ended up strapped to a bed in Croydon for three days."

James Brown never got strapped to a bed with The Vaselines but he might as well have. We met for the exact time between the start of *Top Of The Pops* and the end of Thursday's *EastEnders* in a Glaswegian bar where drinking took second place to fighting. The chick, Frances McKee, sank a selection of wine, cider, and orange juice, and the dude, Eugene Kelly, stuck to the lager because it's a man's drink, you know. I had asparagus beer and Belgian soup. Our mutual acquaintance Stephen [McRobbie, frontman of Glasgow indie heroes The Pastels and founder of 53rd And 3rd Records] – the man who named The Vaselines and who puts out their records – peppered the conversation with Budweiser-sponsored rants that sizzled as they spat from his mouth.

"Listen, if you think these two are weird, you've just got to look at 5 Star. Jesus, they're weird. Incest, rampant incest. The Vaselines are normal compared to 5 Star," he told me.

Where do The Vaselines fit? Place The Jesus & Mary Chain on one side of your mind and Valerie Singleton on the other, and Eugene and Frances will slide eagerly in between. Trash fetishists who've already covered 'You Think You're A Man', the Divine song, as their debut 45, and whose second single 'Dying For It' (53rd & 3rd) is sleeved in garish pink with the repeated image of a limp-wristed cowboy and a locust splattered all over it, they're a class above the rest of the aspirants to the racket bracket.

Musically, they are a reaction against the pathetic pop that followed in the wake of Stephen's temperamental band The Pastels and his mates The Jesus & Mary Chain. Rather than parodying the sycophancy like Talulah Gosh, with whom the beginning and end of the joke rapidly became invisible, or The Pooh Sticks have done, The Vaselines have simply subverted the sexuality of the genre and taken it down among the dustbins and washing baskets of John Inman, Kenneth Williams, and Cilla Black. They're high-camp commandants with a rowche and rumble and they've certainly got their priorities in order.

Eugene and Frances know that it is wit, cunning and flippant comment, and not Velvets riffs, that give a band an edge. They know sex sells best and even if it doesn't it's funnier than po-faced image mongering. The Vaselines are tartish, not dry and sterile like Erasure and The Communards nor Jaffa Cake-ish like Boy George or George Michael, but uncouth and sexy like Miranda Richardson's Queen Elizabeth I in *Blackadder*. They're dressed-down oiks. Eugene is Rupert Everett with Paddy McAloon's haircut, Frances is the girl who was too sharp to be a woman in the *Carry On* films.

"The thing is, there are different types of sexy," she tells me. "And those people that say 'Hey, look at me, I'm really sexy' generally aren't, they're a real turn-off."

"We deliberately put our pictures all over our sleeves so that people get sick of seeing them, sick of having them rammed down their throats," adds Eugene.

Formed as The Good Fucks three years ago, they switched their name to The Vaselines when they realised The Good Fucks was commercially binding, and ever since they've grasped the rock'n'roll lifestyle with all the drug-throttled frenzy they can muster. The new single, raved about by Edwin Pouncey in last week's *NME*, has lashings of thrashing, wailing guitar smeared all over the first track 'Dying For It' by David Keegan, the pipe-cleaner punk from The Shop Assistants.

But as Stephen tells me: "David's not into music anymore, he spends all his time skiing now."

"We'd finished the song but it needed something extra," continues Eugene. "We knew what we wanted but I'm so talentless I couldn't play it so we asked David down. He turned up with a load of fuzzboxes and went mental for 10 minutes. Then he left – it was perfect.

"'Teenage Jesus' on the B-side is what it sounds like when I try and get a really raw guitar sound. It takes a certain lack of talent to get that sort of guitar sound and I can manage it. 'Teenage Jesus' is about waking up and thinking you're Jesus. Lying in bed savouring what great things are before you, then your mum comes in and tells you to get up and get dressed. It's very strange but Divine died the day 'Dying For It' came out."

Perhaps David Keegan will die the day your next single comes out.

"No, this Divine thing is weird. His films were our main inspiration. After all he was the most disgusting person ever on Earth, someone's got to take over that post."

The Vaselines, perhaps?

"Perhaps."

While the band are not keen to waste away a night bitching about crappy Glasgow bands who've been spotlighted in the past, there are certain things that do rub a Vaseline up the wrong way...

"Unnatural breasts. C'mon, have you seen that Vanessa Paradis girl. She's got unnatural breasts, she's definitely on hormones or something."

Eugene, would you pick on someone if they had strange legs?

"You don't have certain sized legs for what age you are but you do have certain sized breasts – either large or small. I don't see many 14–year-olds walking around Glasgow with... with... thin breasts like that."

"What's so sad about it is she looks like her manager has told her to wear a see-through leotard."

Pink sleeves, Divine covers, a suspicion of pubescent French girls, and a new single that's as addictive as Sharp's Extra Strong Mints. Welcome to The Vaselines, this week's perfect perverts.

GETTY

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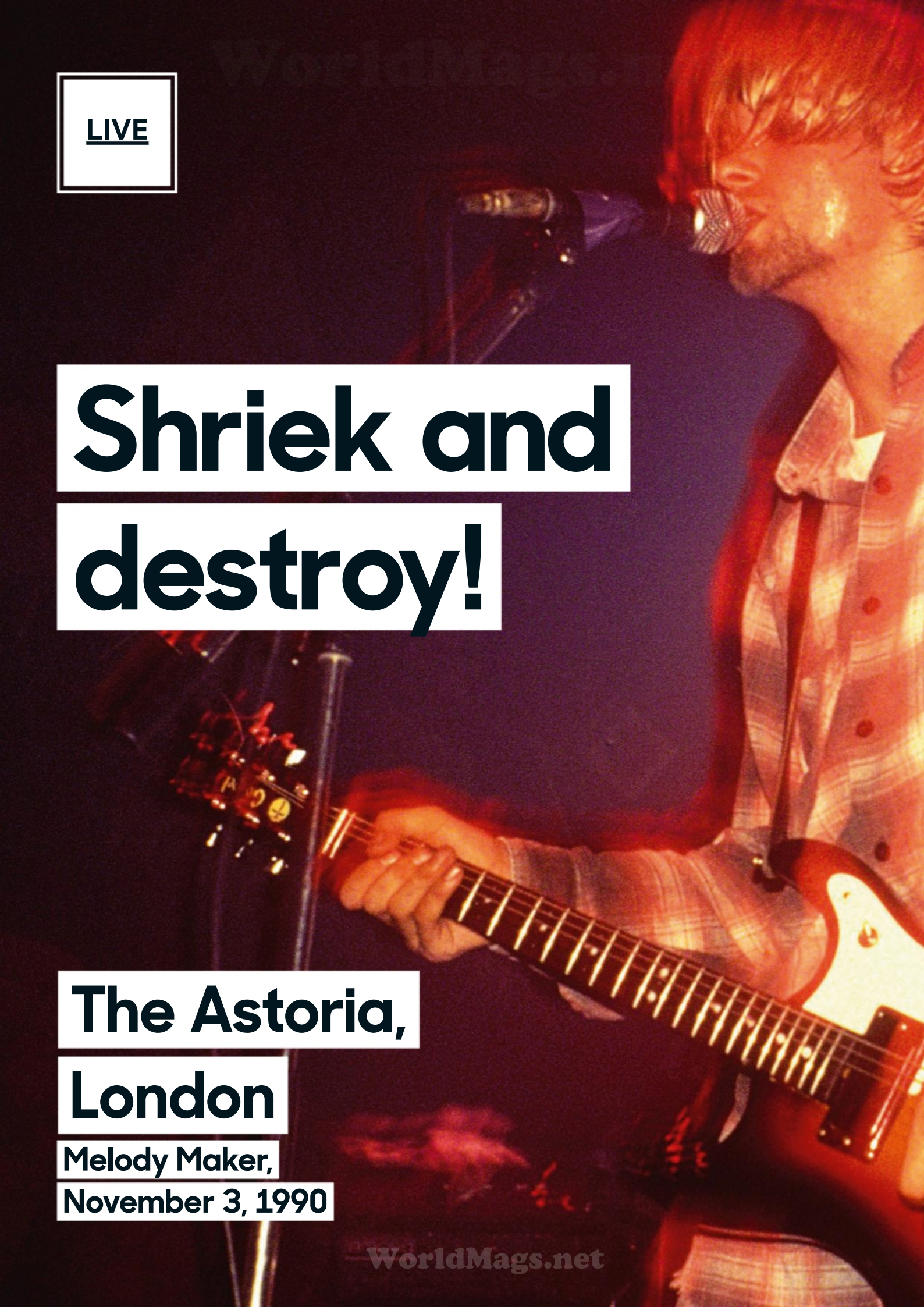
Slippery customers: (l-r) Eugene Kelly, Frances McKee

"There are different types of sexy"

Frances McKee



LIVE

Shriek and destroy!

The Astoria, London

Melody Maker, November 3, 1990

WorldMags.net

With L7 in tow, Nirvana returned to the UK in late 1990, and faced this brief one-man backlash...

Nirvana have a lot of friends. The guest list reads like a small(ish) telephone directory, touts prowl in force and queues stretch around the block. The mythology of the American mid-west, as ever with Sub Pop bands, influences the event like an invisible magnet. In England, the only people who go "cruising", hang around outside 7-11s all night and argue whether they're old enough to buy six-packs are flash, stroppy girls. Compared to the America of *River's Edge*, *Easy Rider* or whatever, England seems to lack a certain magic. The other aspect of this mythology is that however often it's served up, we go for it every time.

Take L7, for instance. They're about as unprecedented as dried piss in a London Underground waiting room, but nowhere near as rancid. In fact, they're fantastic, a fuel-injected fuck-you that charges up the iconography of the rebel without a cause so fearlessly it sounds timeless, the way it should always sound – stripped to the core and right in there; reckless, eternally unsatisfied and a law unto itself.

L7 don't want to be seen as part of any new breed of wild wimmin in rock, but what comes across tonight is a strong dose of tribalism, a heavy, minimal beat of determination that lets you know you'd need a stronger death wish than their own to even consider standing in their way. The vocals are contorted into a taut, gravel-caked sneer, the guitars are pure friction burn and acceleration, and each steadfast posture of defiance is no mere empty gesture. Like The Fury Things, they're hilarious because they catch you off-guard. They make you *believe*. It's not often that something this tried and tested sounds close to revelation.

I came to the conclusion tonight that Nirvana are the John Cougar Mellencamp of the Sub Pop aesthetic. They lack the exhaust flame of L7 and the hot coals of Godflesh (who are second on the bill), and whatever fires them up seems paltry in comparison. There's none of the clenched, drawn-out tension of the 'Bleach' LP, and in fact they sound almost sincere, as if everything's too geared towards gaining our sympathy.

Swervedriver do this kind of thing with far more bite (alas, there's no justice in this world), the ruffled mini-traumas, self-pity turning into a contained anger and the ability to whinge without sounding like a jessie, but Nirvana's inherently exotic allure sounds too romanticised and self-conscious, all but removed.

Nirvana only seem to have one song. This generally consists of the finely ground drawl of Kurdt Kobain (try finding a name as good as that in a British phone directory) repeating the same phrase over and over again until it sounds trite and then everybody shakes their hair for a bit. Yowsa. Good bits are few and far between, the slow-burn and anthracitic undercurrent of 'Blew', the Prong-like incisiveness of 'Big Cheese', and that's about it. But tonight the Astoria is seething, a sea of moshers bubbling over, people swimming on top of heads and tangled stagedivers being subsumed back into the froth. The mythology of remoteness comes around again, but nobody is willing to come around to the fact that Nirvana simply don't live up to it. ■ JONATHAN SELZER

RETNA/TONY MOTTRAM

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The Wisdom Of Nirvana

From their earliest interviews, Nirvana were among rock's mightiest motormouths. Here are their greatest nuggets of the age...

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On rock

"When I was in junior high school, my family moved from Los Angeles to screwy, bumfuck Aberdeen. I had these bands that were dear to me, Led Zeppelin and Devo, when everybody else was into Kenny Rogers. Three years down the road all these people that I considered to be infidels, the unenlightened, were listening to Led Zeppelin. I remember feeling really angry that all of those people were grabbing ahold of my sacred cow. But that's the way things go. I'll still listen to those bands."
KRIST

"I've never claimed to be a punk rocker, I've just claimed to have liked punk rock music. I'd like to be a rhythm guitar player in a band! No one realises how fuckin' hard it is to scream at the top of your lungs and concentrate on playing guitar solos."
KURT

"A band like Jesus Jones are... marketed as alternative but they're just mainstream rock'n'rollers. And that's why I speak out against bands like that – they exploit the alternative world. Bands have worked so hard for so long and these jokers come around going, 'Yeah we're alternative'... It's just like a slap in the face for the whole community."
KRIST

"Metal's searching for an identity because it's exhausted itself; so they're going to latch onto us. We're not metal fans." KRIST

"It's the attitude that sets it apart. When you think of heavy metal, you think of sexist innuendos and pseudo-Satanism."
DAVE

"A lot of heavy metal kids are just plain dumb. I'm sorry. We're heavy, but we're not heavy metal." KRIST

"You know what I hate about rock? Cartoons and horns. I hate Phil Collins, all of that white male soul. I hate tie-dyed T-shirts, too. You know there are bootleg tie-dyed T-shirts of Nirvana? I hate that. I wouldn't wear a tie-dyed T-shirt unless it was dyed with the urine of Phil Collins and the blood of Jerry Garcia."
KURT

"So, all the political nastiness that I've heard of for years from independent record people is true. People like Bruce Pavitt and Calvin Johnson – people who have been pretty successful throughout the years with introducing underground, independent music and creating a community feel within their environment and just exercising the whole DIY ethic – have known a lot of people who have experienced the major-label fuck-overs..."
KURT

On Society

"I kind of respect people who go out of their way to act like an asshole when they're really intelligent. It's a nihilistic statement, like saying there's no point in trying to be a human anymore because things have gotten so out of hand. It's a very punk-rock attitude, but I also think it's boring to be Johnny Rotten after all these years. I'm not talking about sexism, but that kind of negative attitude when you're no longer able to appreciate passion or beauty."
KURT

"There's this saying, 'What's the value of preaching if man isn't redeemable?' I go back and forth on that, but basically, we're total optimists. We don't have any agenda. We can yell, 'Revolution!' and we can yell, 'The middle class is fucked, go downtown and smash all the windows.' But then what? There's no agenda. All we are saying is 'Be aware'. There's a lot of information out there, use it."
KRIST

"Rape is one of the most terrible crimes on earth. And it happens every few minutes. The problem with groups who deal with rape is that they try to educate women about how to defend themselves. What really needs to be done is teaching men not to rape. Go to the source and start there."
KURT

"Personally, I'm looking forward to total economic collapse. They're putting so many Band-Aids on the economy right now. Bush is pumping money into the banks, but it won't be long before they go down. And when that happens it's going to make the '30s look like a fucking holiday."
KRIST

"I don't use cuss-words on my albums, not because I don't want a sticker on my record but because there's just no point. It's been done a million times and I don't personally need to use that kind of language in my lyrics. I think I have cussed a few times, where it was necessary, but I think for the most part we're pretty positive... Like we've been accused of inciting people to drop out of society. But if we do that, it's not in a lazy way. I mean, I've always thought of us attacking that slacker stuff. But we have pointed out things about society that are not good and I know some people don't like that, they think it's dangerous."
KURT

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On Nirvana

"I think Kurt has something no one else has – his way of writing simple, childlike, minimalist tunes that stick, and that just shows that you don't have to be so accomplished to impress. Anybody can do Kurt Cobain, anybody can do Krist Novoselic... none of us were cut out for this."
DAVE

"People ask Kurt about his lyrics and he just never gives any straight answers about what a song means. I listen to the lyrics and that's what they mean to me. And I apply that back to politics – people should be out trying to improve themselves, every day trying to do something better and better. To just go out and follow somebody in some stupid band thinking he or she is spokesperson for a generation – hey, you should try harder, man."
KRIST

"The most anti-authority guy in the band is Kurt. The most anti-authority guy I know is Kurt. He'll be the one to walk up to people and scream, 'Why? Why? Why?' A lot of times I'll understand the reason behind things, even if I don't agree with it. Kurt's the guy out there yelling at the top of his lungs."
KRIST

"I don't know how to explain what happens to me when I do an interview, because I usually shut myself off. It's really hard to explain. I just don't like to get intimate. I don't want anyone to know what I feel and what I think, and if they can't get some idea of what sort of person I am through my music, then that's too bad."
KURT

"I guess it is better to be called a moody visionary than a mindless party animal. I tried to become an alcoholic once, but it didn't work."
KURT

"I have my guitar-smashing room in the back, where I practise four hours a day."
KURT

"When I joined the band, I lived with Kurt for eight months. When I first got there, he had just broken up with a girl and was totally heartbroken. We would sit in his tiny, shoebox apartment for eight hours at a time without saying a word. For weeks and weeks this happened. Finally one night, we were driving back in the van, and Kurt said, 'You know, I'm not always like this.' And I just went, '*Phewww*.'"
DAVE

On art and culture

"A year before I put out the 'Bleach' album... I was just painting and doing art stuff. I still do, but now I use oils because I can afford them. I like Goya a lot – I use animated dolls a fair amount. I don't mean to make them look evil, but they always end up that way."
KURT

"You know, there's an LA band called Love Buzz, and their first album is called 'Grunge'. I want to get that album real bad."
KURT

"At times. I wish I could take a pill that would allow me to be amused by television and just enjoy the simple things in life, instead of being so judgemental and expecting real good quality instead of shit."
KURT

"Record companies are schemers, they have to have marketing strategies. It's gross. But let's wait and see what happens, 'cos I'm Mister Naive Optimist. 'Oh yeah, all these bands are gonna come up from the underground, it's gonna be great, the music's gonna be great and maybe it'll reflect on culture, and maybe people'll raise their standards musically, and then they'll wanna raise their standards in other media, like television and film, they'll wanna watch better things...' When in reality what's probably gonna happen is there's just gonna be an alternative Vanilla Ice! You'll see!"
KRIST

on family

"I'm looking forward to being older. I've got everything going against youth that I possibly can. I'm married. I'm losing hair. I heard somebody say that Nirvana is against the old generation. That's not right. We're just against the old guard."
KRIST

"I've always had really good Christmasses with my family – I have a very large family. Everyone has always gotten together and had a great blow-out, at least until my grandfather died. He was usually the highlight of the ceremonies. He'd get really drunk, put on wacky hats and sing for everyone."
KURT

on drugs

"It's like, I have this hash and I'm going to have to give it away when we leave Amsterdam. There's nothing wrong with it. I'm not going to hurt anybody. Authority and the whole policeman mentality is just fucked. I've been arrested before. I've had police come to my house. So many cops are just dumb."
KRIST

"I think people who glamorise drugs are fucking assholes and if there's a hell they'll go there. It's really bad karma. I saw this movie, 'Over The Edge' [Tim Hunter's movie about a group of suburban teenagers who trap their parents and teachers in a school hall and attempt to burn it down]. And I remember leaving that theatre and almost everyone who was in there came running out screaming their heads off and breaking windows and vandalising and wanting to get high. It totally affected them and influenced them. It may not have been the intention of the person who made the movie, and it is a great movie, but that's what happened. It happens a lot with movies and music, and the people who are usually not-very-involved people in the first place. At the beginning we were... not negative, but we did address dark and negative issues. I mean, we're not The Staple Singers, but I could never see myself singing about Satan or glamorising drug use or anything like that. I just couldn't do it."
KURT

on the Seattle scene

"I was tired of pretending that I was someone else just to get along with people, just for the sake of having friendships. I was tired of wearing flannel shirts and chewing tobacco, and I became a monk in my room for years. And I forgot what it was like to socialise. I was obnoxious when I drank too much. Then there was a period during the last two years of high school when I didn't have any friends, and I didn't drink or do any drugs at all, and I sat in my room and played guitar. I started hanging around with people like Mudhoney. Mainly they were just other people in bands. I wasn't really part of a thriving Seattle social scene. Both Krist and I thought of ourselves as outsiders – we wrote that song 'School' about the crazy Seattle scene, how it reminded us of high school."
KURT

"I was always more of a feminine person when I was young, I just didn't know it. Then, when my hormones started swinging around and I started getting facial hair, I had to let off my male steam somewhere, so I started smoking pot and listening to Black Sabbath and Black Flag. It took the Pixies to put me back on the right track and off the whole macho punk-rock trip."
KURT

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▶FROM THE ARCHIVE

"I hate Bl so muc now"

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Melody Maker
December 15, 1990

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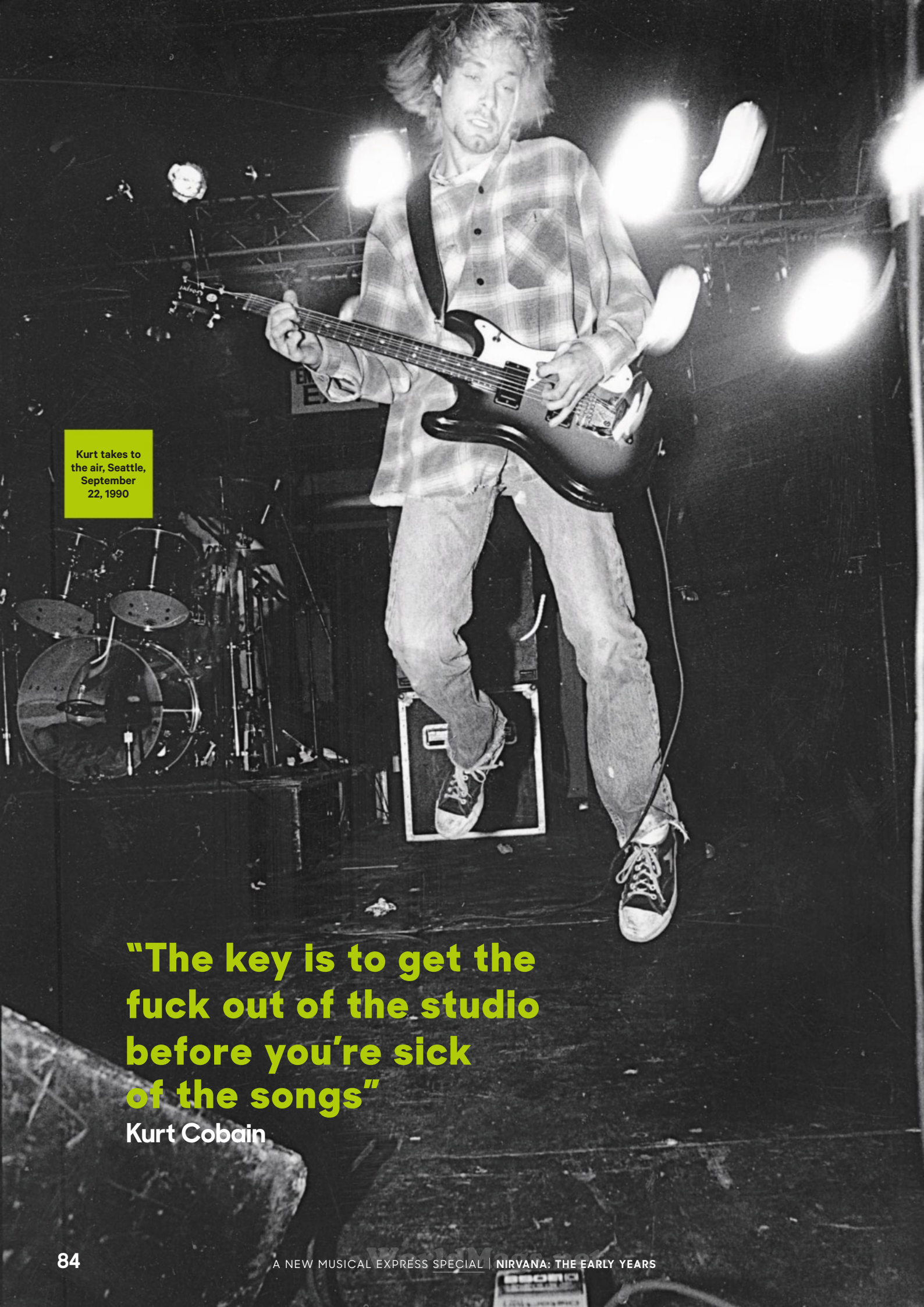
As they prepared to release their first post-'Bleach' material, Melody Maker writer Push cornered Nirvana to talk about their new single 'Sliver', Grohl's arrival and getting screwed by the majors

Nirvana's new single 'Sliver' weighs in at a fraction over two minutes and is one hell of a pop song.

Kurdt Kobain (vocals/guitar): "We like to think of it that way too. It's probably the most straightforward song we've ever recorded, but we don't really care if people say that we're spinning off at a tangent. We've always tried to accomplish something new with every track and we've always liked the idea that each one sounds as if it's been written by a different band."

The glorious guitars and vibrant vocal harmonies of 'Sliver' are, however, a careful progression rather than a radical departure from their highly acclaimed 'Bleach' LP. →



Kurt takes to the air, Seattle, September 22, 1990

"The key is to get the fuck out of the studio before you're sick of the songs"

Kurt Cobain

Even during the darkest moments of 'Bleach', when the bass rumbles and Kurdt howls in mock sympathy, there's still a chance that a melody will suddenly spring forward to alter the mood. Nirvana are undoubtedly experts in the art of surprise.

Moreover, there's another sting in 'Sliver''s tail. It tells of the traumas of a child away from his parents for the first time and Kurdt believes it is as scary as it is poppy.

"Mom and dad go off somewhere and leave the kid with his grandparents and he gets frightened. But hey, you mustn't get too worried about him – grandpa doesn't abuse him or anything like that. And in the last verse he wakes back up in his mother's arms."

Chris Novoselic (bass): "We now specialise in happy endings. No, that's not true, we actually didn't really know what we were doing with the song when we recorded it. We did it on a whim."

Kurdt: "Yeah, we recorded it in an hour. But that's nothing new – we recorded 'Bleach' like it was a radio session. The key to a successful album is to get the fuck out of the studio before you're sick of the songs. I hate 'Bleach' so much now."

Dave Grohl (drums): "I still love the album, but that's probably because I've only been in the band for six weeks. I'm sure I'll get sick of it soon."

Dave has already been with Nirvana longer than their last drummer, Dan Peters, who joined the band in time to record 'Sliver' and left as the tape cooled down. Dan is better known as a member of Mudhoney, and there's been speculation about him switching allegiance for ages.

So how come Dan was in Nirvana for mere days?

Kurdt: "It wasn't that we were unhappy with Dan's drumming, it was just that Dave has qualities that match our needs a little closer. He takes care of backing vocals for a start. We were blown away when we saw him playing for this band Scream a few months ago and Chris and I agreed that we'd ask him to join Nirvana if we ever had the chance. Ironically, that chance came a week after we got Danny in."

Dave says that one of the best things about being in Nirvana is that all the major record companies are taking the band to dinner to discuss a possible deal. What's the latest?

Kurdt: "There are six or seven labels interested in us now, but we're keeping all our options open. It's mainly a question of who understands us best."

Dave: "But we have to remember that a major wants you to make money for them, and if you don't do that, they can fuck you and they fuck you hard."

Chris: "Oh, sure, but also bear in mind that we've got a lawyer. We have the same lawyer as The Rolling Stones, Poison, Kiss, the Bangles..."

Whatever label Nirvana's second album appears on, Chris wants it to be a box-set of seven seven-inch singles, each containing a pop tune on one side and a grunge track on the other. The idea sounds almost as much fun as the band's John Peel session, of a few weeks ago, for which they recorded irreverent versions of songs by Devo, the Wipers and The Vaselines.

Nirvana also appear on the recent Velvet Underground album and Kiss covers compilation, contributing 'Here She Comes Now' and 'Do You Love Me?' respectively.

Kurdt: "The whole idea of a cover is to have some fun. We've never tried to do a straight copy and we've never bothered to pull a song apart in order to learn it properly, we'd rather just get on and do it."

Dave: "The Vaselines songs we recorded sounded nothing like the originals at all. I'd like more covers in our live set, but Kurdt has problems remembering the words to most of them."

Chris: "What the hell does that matter?"

Nothing, it would seem, is precious to Nirvana, and it's worth noting that Kurdt has recently had his long blonde hair chopped off. Although Mudhoney's Mark Arm beat him to that idea, he's gone a step further by having what's left dyed green.

Kurdt: "I didn't do it to prove that we're not a Sub Pop big hair band, I did it because I wanted to."

Chris: "I hate the way that every single thing you do or say is seen as being of such great importance, just because you're in a band. We've been portrayed as redneck illiterates just because of where we're from, and while I don't mind admitting that we're from a redneck town, we've always had trouble dealing with the attitudes that prevail out there. By the same token, we're not an underground band because we've had records out on Sub Pop, and we're not a teenage pop group because we now want to sign to a major label."

Kurdt: "We're just some guys playing some music."

And modesty has rarely sounded so good. ■

FOOTNOTE 1
Dan Peters still drums in Mudhoney to this day, and also had a stint in Mark Lanegan's grunge-era band Screaming Trees. He only played live once with Nirvana, on September 22, 1990 in Seattle, when one Dave Grohl was in the audience looking on...

FOOTNOTE 2
In May 1990, Sub Pop had asked Nirvana to sign a new deal. Unimpressed by what they saw as the label's bad promotion and condescension, the band found a lawyer through Soundgarden's manager. Music biz lawyer Alan Mintz thought Nirvana the scruffiest band who had ever walked through his door, but saw their potential and eventually secured their deal with Geffen at the end of 1990.

FOOTNOTE 3
The October 1990 session, which you can listen to at bbc.co.uk, features The Wipers' 'D-7' (see Bleach track-by-track, p35), Devo's 'Turnaround' and The Vaselines' 'Molly's Lips' and 'Son Of A Gun'. The latter three tracks would later appear on 1992's 'Incesticide'.

Slaughtering your first-born

Nirvana weren't the only act that quickly went off their debut

The La's

Lee Mavers of The La's spent three years in the studio with a string of producers chasing the sound in his head. His demands were so precise and exacting that no-one ever managed to replicate it, and when 'The La's' emerged in 1990, the band disowned it instantly. It's now considered among the best albums ever made and one of the launchpads of Britpop.

The Beta Band

With the compilation of their first three EPs 'The Three EP's' widely lauded by the critics, The Beta Band hobbled their own career by describing their self-titled 1999 debut album proper as "fucking awful".

The Wedding Present

The Weddoes' 1987 debut 'George Best' was hailed as a classic of the C86 era, but singer David Gedge was frustrated at the low-budget sound and often dismissed the record in the press, striving for meatier sonics on later albums. He would, however, revisit the album to play in full on a tour in 2007.

Radiohead

The exploratory avant-garde Radiohead of the post-'OK Computer' era have distanced themselves from the raw US-slanted rock of their debut album 'Pablo Honey', although guitarist Johnny Greenwood has recently declared it "underrated".

STEPHEN SWEET, CHARLES PETERSON/COURTESY OF SUB POP RECORDS

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Kurt's influences

The 'Journals' Entries

In his journals, published in 2002, Kurt wrote a comprehensive list of his favourite ever records. Here's a breakdown of 20 from Kurt's eclectic pantheon

PJ Harvey
Dry (1992, Too Pure)
Today, PJ Harvey is so revered she's got an OBE. In 1992, though, she was unnervingly raw and feral, and 'Dry' was a shrieking, snarling debut of guttural blues-punk.

REM
Green (1988, Warner)
REM's major label debut didn't scrimp on underground mentality. The beefier, brasher sound hinted at a studio-filling future but there's nuggets of eclectic experimentation to be found, too.

Black Flag
My War (1984, SST)
The first of a glut of albums Black Flag released in 1984, 'My War' found the hardcore punks moving beyond furious thrashes and embracing a heavier sound reminiscent of Black Sabbath.

Gang Of Four
Entertainment (1979, EMI)
A twitchy, bug-eyed and frenetic post-punk debut, marrying funk, dub and reggae to the nagging, morse-code riffs of Andy Gill's guitar. The blueprint for every thought that has crossed Franz Ferdinand or Bloc Party's brains.

The Knack
Get The Knack (1979, Capitol)
One of the most successful debut albums ever, 'Get The Knack' was driven by the LA power poppers' mega-hit 'My Sharona', a creepy tale of fancying young girls with a totally irresistible beat (Kurt certainly found it hard to resist on 'Scoff').

Rites Of Spring
Rites Of Spring (1985, Dischord)
This Washington post-hardcore crew were known for their live ferocity, and two of their number, guitarist Guy Picciotto and drummer Brendan Canty, went on to play in Fugazi.

Fang
Landshark (1982, Boner)
This snarly hardcore crew from the fertile punk scene of Berkeley, California wrote 'The Money Will Roll Right In', which features on this album and was covered not only by Nirvana but also Mudhoney, Metallica and RTX. They split up when lead singer Sam McBride was sent to prison for murdering his girlfriend.

The Clash
Combat Rock (1982, Columbia)
The London punk sloganeers fifth album contains some of their biggest pop smashes – 'Should I Stay Or Should I Go' and 'Rock The Casbah' for starters – but also, in 'Straight To Hell', their most surprisingly delicate and emotional moment.

Mudhoney
Superfuzz Bigmuff (1988, Sub Pop)
In their early days, Nirvana were always mentioned in the same breath as their labelmates, whose sludgy, bratty sound was already established in music fans' consciousness by this class '88 mini-album. Three decades on, the situation is very much reversed...

Daniel Johnston
Yip/Jump Music (1983, self-released/1988, Homestead)
The figurehead of outsider music, Daniel Johnston's sweet, naive compositions are feted by many more mainstream rock musicians, and he's a godfather of the lo-fi movement. His songs have been covered by Karen O, Spiritualized, Tom Waits and Yo La Tengo.

Aerosmith
Rocks (1976, Columbia)
The Boston rock pigs' fourth is their rawest set, and hugely influential. Kurt was conflicted, though, saying in an interview: "I really enjoyed some of the melodies that they'd written. It took me so many years to realise that a lot of it was to do with sexism. The way that they just wrote about their dicks and having sex."

Frogs
It's Only Right And Natural (1989, Homestead)
Milwaukee brothers Jimmy and Dennis Flemion are known for their lo-fi, home recordings (and also the six-foot bat wings Jimmy wore during performances). This, their first properly released collection, centres around the theme of homosexuality.

Butthole Surfers
Butthole Surfers (1983, Alternative Tentacles)
The Texan punk psychonauts brought a strange brew of disparate elements to a post-hardcore template, with hilarious, terrifying results. The heavy noise and silly titles ('Bar-B-Q Pope', 'The Revenge Of Anus Presley') of this debut EP (itself also known as 'Pee Pee The Sailor') announced their anti-formula to the world.

Sonic Youth
Daydream Nation (1988, Enigma)
Probably the album held by most as the Youth's masterpiece , this vicious, beautiful, punk-pysch soundworld set a template and benchmark for alternative guitar music for decades to come.

Iggy And The Stooges
Raw Power (1973, Columbia)
One of the most influential albums ever, the Stooges' primal garage racket here has whole genres growing in its footsteps. Nirvana came closer to emulating the fury than most.

David Bowie
The Man Who Sold The World (1970, EMI)
Nirvana covered the title track with brittle beauty on 1994's 'MTV Unplugged' album, but the hard heavy glam of the album, combined with its strong melodies, influenced Kurt as a whole.

Swans
Young God (1984, K.422)
The ferocity of Swans' punishing noise was notorious in the '80s, and this EP (actually officially known as 'Young God') is considered their most brutal release.

Public Enemy
It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back (1988, Def Jam/Columbia)
Chuck D and his boys aimed at the hip-hop equivalent of Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On' for their second album, and they didn't half nail it, with a furious, attention-grabbing and riot/party-starting collection of irresistible protest.

PiL
Flowers Of Romance (1981, Virgin)
John Lydon's post-Pistols band are at their most challenging on this bleak, sometimes beautiful album. The band's Keith Levene described it as the least commercial record ever delivered to a company.

The Beatles
Meet The Beatles! (1964, Capitol)
The Beatles' US label issued different albums to the UK for many years. This, the second, Includes 'I Saw Her Standing There', 'All My Loving' and 'I Want To Hold Your Hand', and was at No 1 for 11 weeks.

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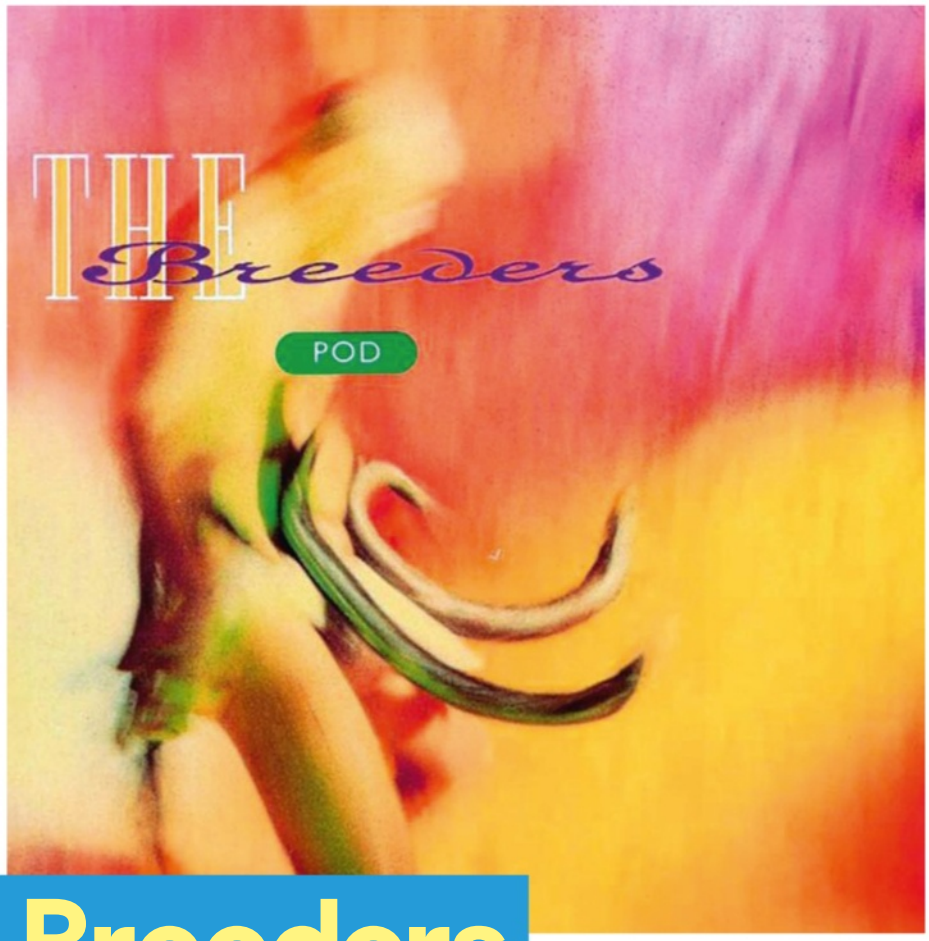

10 The Breeders Pod

(1980, 4AD)

Kurt said: "It's an epic that will never let you forget your ex-girlfriend. I don't necessarily mean that the record reminds me of my last girlfriend. It seems that when the girls in The Breeders get together, they give off this air of... their ex-boyfriends. But the main reason I like them is for their songs, for the way they structure them, which is totally unique, very atmospheric. I wish Kim was allowed to write more songs for the Pixies, because 'Gigantic' is the best Pixies song, and Kim wrote it. You can sense they love men at the same time."

▶THE DETAILS

RECORDED: December 1989 **RELEASE DATE:** May 28, 1990 **PRODUCER:** Steve Albini **STUDIOS:** Palladium, Edinburgh **HIGHEST UK CHART POSITION:** N/A **TRACKLISTING:** ▶1. Glorious ▶2. Doe ▶3. Happiness Is A Warm Gun ▶4. Oh! ▶5. Hellbound ▶6. When I Was a Painter ▶7. Fortunately Gone ▶8. Iris ▶9. Opened ▶10. Only in 3's ▶11. Lime House ▶12. Metal Man

FIVE FACTS

1 Notoriously picky and irascible producer – and post-hardcore hero – Steve Albini said that 'Pod' was the album where he felt he got the best sound for, and the best performance from, a band.

2 Pod was recorded and released while Kim Deal was still in the Pixies, and her then-bandmate Tanya Donelly was still in Throwing Muses (Donnelly left prior to second Breeders album 'Last Splash', then going on to form Belly).

3 Britt Walford of post-rock icons Slint agreed to play drums on the record if he could do so under a false name and so is credited as Shannon Doughton.

4 The Breeders' name predates the 'Pod' lineup of Kim Deal, Tanya Donnelly, bassist Josephine Wiggs (of UK band The Perfect Disaster) and Carrie Bradley, being the moniker Kim and her twin Kelley used to perform under in their youth in Dayton, Ohio. Kelley joined the band for the 'Last Splash' album. The 'Pod' Breeders were called 'Boston Girl Super-group' on their original demo tape for 4AD.

5 On May 9, 2013, Tanya Donnelly joined a reformed ('Last Splash' lineup) Breeders to perform two songs in Boston, 'Do You Love Me Now', and their brutal cover of The Beatles' 'Happiness Is A Warm Gun'. You can find it on YouTube.

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Kurt's influences

Breeders

Kim Deal's spin-off from the Pixies were, according to Kurt, "totally unique" and their debut album 'Pod' was a life-changer for him. Come 1993 and 'Cannonball', however, they were seriously overground. Stephen Dalton visited the procreation nation to discuss grunge, drugs and stealing your sister's boyfriends. Anything, in fact, except the Pixies...

Kim Deal is everyone's favourite Breeder. Something about the way she swears like a truck driver, dresses like an auto mechanic and sings like a sleepy-eyed angel. A history of bar-room brawls with sexist rednecks pretty much clinches her elevation to rock 'n' roll sainthood.

She lists Black Sabbath, Three Degrees, Ted Nugent and Chiffons songs in her all time Top Ten. Something of the Breeders scattershot genealogy lies between these crazy–paving cracks, where gushing girl-group harmonies straddle the hairy shoulders of full-steam Jurassic metal. All this makes them seem like a secret biological weapon concealed within the crisp leather portfolio of their crafty British label 4AD. But the new Breeders single, 'Cannonball' might just be the one to blow this notoriously arthouse indie's clandestine 'Let's rock!' strategy wide open.

Kim's twin sister, Kelley, gets her first crack at being a full-time Breeder on 'Cannonball', a mighty first blast from the band's new regime. Kim calls it her "reggae song", which only begins to make sense when you hear her woozy, unplugged version on Radio 1's *The Guest List*. Either way around, it's a '90s crossbreed classic, a sweetly swooning vocal refrain squirming around inside an armour-plated see-saw of a riff.

Hard on the heels of 'Cannonball' comes The Breeders' 'Last Splash', the long awaited sequel to 1990's stupendous debut album, 'Pod'. Both new titles refer to swimming pool show-offs and obliquely mock the Marquis De Sade's libertine posturing, but you don't need to know this to enjoy the newly fleshed-out and muscular thrill of either. After the single vaporises any lingering reservations about the foursome being supergroup hobbyists, the album should flatten all remaining walls between their arty origins and arena-filling future. And make no mistake – they came to rock.

What strikes you first about identical twins Kim and Kelley is how little they look alike. Today, in an East London studio, Kim is deadbeat and jetlagged, Kelley fresh-faced and salon-beautiful. Token Brit bassist Josephine Wiggs and new-boy drummer Jim Macpherson orbit this bemusement.

Of the current Breeders, only Jo and Kim played on 'Pod', a mighty set of scarifying Twilight Zone scenarios coated in sparse hardcore-pop and thrown into sharp relief by an uncompromising Steve Albini production. In recent months, they've been on a frantic merry-go-round. Last summer, original guitarist Tanya Donelly amicably quit both Deal's band and labelmates Throwing Muses to form Belly. Kelley replaced her just after the svelte 'Safari' EP and Jo launched her Honey Tongue side project. This year, The Breeders poached Jim from Dayton group Raging Mantras to take over from a plethora of drummers, recorded 'Last Splash' in San Francisco and played a benefit for Bosnian rape victims alongside Nirvana, Sonic Youth and Hiphoprisy.

And, oh yes. In the midst of all this brouhaha, Kim lost her day job when the Pixies split. Critical darlings with modest commercial success, the Boston indie giants had long since stopped making records as visceral and bicep-rippling as 'Cannonball' when chief Pixie Black Francis called time with his Frank Black solo album and left Kim holding the baby. But The Breeders nursed their bastard child back to rude health on steroids and Black Sabbath. Now, with a fuller sound and a kick-over-the-statues attitude, the prodigal daughter is back, tooled-up and ready. The latest Breeders press briefing pointedly omits any mention of Kim's former band and warns all enquires on the subject will be met with "dull blank stares". In fact, Kim's screwed-up expression is more like that of a constipated chimpanzee when this sore point inevitably arises...

"Oh, it's a Pixies question!" Alas, yes. In early Breeders interviews Kim claimed she was rock-solid in her bass-playing sidekick role but now she admits the brutal fax from Charles at New Year came as no surprise at all. The friendship on which the Pixies was founded in 1986 clearly soured badly at some point during the last three years, so how do relations stand now?

NME
August 9, 1993

"I haven't talked to him since we broke up," she nods blankly. "Haven't talked to him since we played our last show, which was a year ago in Vancouver. I talked to Joe and David though." Kim confirms last February's *NME* cover story, in which Charles bluntly claimed "she wrote maybe half of two songs", as accurate. By now, normal effusive answers have become clipped and brusque. "It's just boring, it has nothing to do with anyone else and it makes me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed..."

Kelley cuts in: "It's quite fun to watch you squirm, though."

"In America, people don't care about the Pixies," continues Kim. "Belly and L7 are bigger than we ever were..."

But maybe Tanya's departure and subsequent success with Belly has been a good omen introducing large rock audiences to elements of the Breeders sound.

"She wasn't involved enough to influence it one way or the other. She'll probably read this and say, 'Well, thanks guys', but it's true."

Kim dismisses simplistic comparisons between her creative ambitions in the Pixies and with her own band. "It's just a baby substitute," cracks Jo, dry as parchment. "You have a rock band because you haven't had children yet. It's the only reason you would do it, after all."

If the Deal sisters represent the twin peaks of The Breeders, Kim is a volatile volcano to Kelley's silent summit. Kelley gets away with taking the piss out of her sibling more than Jo or Jim, but it soon becomes clear where the bands power nucleus lies. With unspoken deference, everyone seems geared towards winning her mother-hen approval. When Kelley jokes that the straight-faced Aerosmith cover 'Lord Of The Thighs', on the flipside of 'Cannonball', could just as easily have been 'Big Ten Inch Record', Kim cuts her dead for vulgarity! Kelley falls into a sulk. But the feisty banter between them seems good-natured, informed by a lifetime of intimacy and friendly rivalry. Long before the Pixies, the sisters covered disco tunes and played truck stops together in their native Dayton, Ohio. Further back still, Kim used to hijack Kelley's high school dates...

Kim: "I didn't steal any of your boyfriends! Who?"

Kelley: "Jimmy!"

Kim: "But everybody liked him! It wasn't stealing, because you didn't care, it was loaning. And didn't you have a fling with Billy?"

Kelley: "Urgh! Gross! A fucking heroin addict without a fucking thumb? Are you kidding?"

Kelley sighs. "The 'Big Ten Inch...' thing pissed me off. You just did a single called 'Lord Of The Thighs' but you've got a problem with me mentioning that?!?"

"'Big Ten Inch...'" is more vulgar than 'Lord Of The Thighs'!" hisses Kim. "It's just that English newspapers, every time you mention sex or tits they print it! We always have sex interviews!"

Stunned silence. Followed by hurricane laughter all round.

An afternoon with The Breeders is like walking into a real-life episode of *Roseanne*. Mid-Western and blue collar in appearance, warm liberals in attitude. It's obviously a family affair. Kim is the matriarchal control freak, Kelley her love-hate sister Jackie, Jo the

KEVIN WESTENBERG/4AD ARCHIVE

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"We always have sex interviews!"

Kim Deal

Fertile sound: (l-r) Kim Deal, Kelley Deal, Jim Macpherson, Josephine Wiggs

wisecracking vegetarian daughter Darlene and Jim her deeply strange younger brother DJ.

But then again, their communal worldview seems shaped by more complex and unsavoury forces than mere familial power games. Every gossipy aside contains flashes of real-life tragedy and underlying sadism, the sci-fi weirdness of growing up in backwoods towns where Aerosmith are still worshipped as minor deities, the sheer horror of sex and bodily functions; all themes which bleed into their music, however subtly. This is Roseanne directed by David Lynch. With a great soundtrack.

Chugging across town with Kim in the passenger seat, a bag of Indian food resting on her lap. We are heading for the BBC as rush-hour London tumbles by outside. Does Kim feel happier discussing Pixies fallout on her own?

"I'm surprised to find out that Charles hates me as much as he seems to," she finally concedes, ruefully. But she won't pass comment on the Frank Black album or simplistic villain/victim arguments. "I guess the reason I don't like talking about the Pixies is it seems to elevate their importance and not ours."

But as 'Last Splash' is her first post-Pixies album, comparisons are inevitable. Like the way words seem less important to The Breeders, using voice more as an instrument than a narrative device, or the way Kim prefers writing angst-free mini-movies to boggle-eyed, soul-baring confessionals...

"Do English people do that more? Because of all that Lord Byron crap you had to put up with, right? I don't think I would expect to hold people's attention if I was just telling them my diary entries."

And maybe the undeniably seminal Pixies, like Hüsker Dü before them, opened doors for others without quite breaking through themselves? With the same management team who handle Nirvana, Sonic Youth, Hole and the Lemonheads behind them, can The Breeders go where Pixies feared to tread, 4AD's revolutionary vanguard ramming firecrackers down the throat of phoney libertines everywhere? They strip art from rock with a no-shit bluntness and a natural abandon that makes – to pick a random example – Frank Black's mix of crunchy hardcore and egghead pop sound laboured. Who needs space-alien stories when you can have the real thing?

'Let's scre some com obnoxious bastar

NME
January 25, 1991

WorldMags.net

w record pany and be ds!'

With the release of 'Sliver' delayed into 1991, NME's Steve Lamacq caught up with the band to talk pop, petrol stations and bizarre pets...

Nirvana's west London hotel room looks like a cross between Cardboard City and a teenager's homework den. Dirty laundry sprawls over three beds, empty lager cans sit disconsolately on a table by the bay window, and a pair of shabby boots guard the door. Adding a surreal touch, a mini TV is burbling out the millionth re-run of *The Wizard Of Oz*.

"I don't believe it," moans Chris Novoselic indignantly, crashing out on one of the three beds.

"I stop drinking alcohol for one day and I get a cold. I should have had lager for breakfast instead of coffee."

This germ-ridden, listless TV scenario has been home for Nirvana – Chris, guitarist/singer Kurdt Kobain and new drummer Dave Grohl – for five days so far. But they're here for a good reason. After a confident, increasingly successful 1990, the US hardcore front-runners have outgrown Sub Pop and are in England discussing deals with various major labels.

Apart from the jet-lag hangover, the flu and the stupefying meetings, the three-piece, having →

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engineered their way out of the Obscure Yank Rut, find themselves poised to take Mudhoney's crown as kings of Seattle.

Their latest, much-delayed single, 'Sliver' – likely to be their last for Sub Pop/Tupelo Recordings – is to many people's surprise (mine included!) a shockingly good boyish pop guitar thrash-along. Following 1989's generally acclaimed debut LP, 'Bleach', 'Sliver' sees them matching their raucous, unrestrained aggression of old with a sort of REM-ish melody.

Its release sets Nirvana up to be one of the most interesting American bands of the year. And on top of this, one of them keeps very strange pets.

"I'll tell you what I miss most, being away from home," says Kurdt, who's strangely reminiscent of the *Oz* scarecrow. "I miss my turtles. I bet they're all dead. I have great big, huge sea-green turtles in my bathtub at home. I mate them. Well, no, they're not huge actually, but I do have small turtles as pets, they fascinate me.

"They have no personality at all and I like that in a pet," he adds. "I have one that's this big (*gestures to about 10 inches*) and I let him out all the time. He'll lay on my chest and close his eyes. They're more affectionate than you might imagine. I used to keep them outside in a kid's swimming pool, but they all escaped. Then I had a dream one night that they all came back... and two days later they did. Spooky. I just like them because they haven't evolved since the dinosaurs. They haven't changed at all."

Just like most of the American punk bands who get washed up on these shores. They haven't evolved since prehistoric punk days. This is what makes Nirvana (and certain other exceptions, like the Lemonheads) appear a far more testing, determined proposition. Nirvana's first break in Britain came via the ultra-credible Sub Pop explosion of '89. But although the rasping sound of Seattle put them in the spotlight, it's been their diversification since that which has maintained their momentum.

"Most of the stuff we saw on MTV was all these schmoozy bands," explains Chris (the *Oz* lion!), drooling out the word "schmoozy" like it's a distasteful sip of cough mixture. "And we thought, 'Fuck it, man, let's screw some record company and be obnoxious bastards', because we were grossed out by what we were seeing. All these punk metal bands, just cashing in..."

Hence the embittered contortions of 'Bleach', one of Sub Pop's landmark LPs, which twisted the rules of thrash into a disfigured mangle of melody and brute force. Now they're broadening their horizons and in the process are starting to challenge the usually predictable, stifling hardcore parameters.

"We're finally coming out of the drains and saying 'We like pop music,'" says Kurdt through his Worzel Gummidge haircut. "I like REM and I like The Smithereens and I'm not afraid to say that any more. And so if we want to write a song like REM, we'll do that, or if we want to write a song like Godflesh, we'll do that."

"We're into a montage of sounds," adds Chris wryly.

Nirvana like Scottish underground cult The Vaselines, plus Beat Happening and Pixies. They don't like car bumper stickers.

"In the US, a dollar buys you this stupid, worthless point of view," says Chris. "So Joe Blow, sheet metal worker, only has to pay a dollar to think 'Wow! Now I have my own personal joke!' Then all these people will go up to him and say, 'Hey, that's a funny bumper sticker you've got there, we must share the same sense of humour - let's have a beer together'. You know those 'I Love My Car' stickers with a heart instead of love? In America they have vandal stickers with a picture of a screw which you stick over the heart... 'I Screw My German Shepherd'."

So once you've got your bumper sticker, you're walking around the service station and what do you see? Shelves of knick-knacks...

"You can go to really weird places, like, in Montana where the gas stations sell Jackalopes. They're these rabbits' heads which have had horns stuck on them."

WAKE UP, WAKE UP, THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME! Nirvana, unlike the convoy truckers, are coming to get you. ■

FOOTNOTE 1
Kurt would later use imagery from *The Wizard Of Oz*, such as the poppy field and the crows, in the disturbing video for 'Heart-Shaped Box', the first single from third album 'In Utero' in 1993.

FOOTNOTE 2
Kurt later expanded on his love of the shelled reptiles, saying: "They're real docile. They don't move, they don't show emotion. They're so inanimate, you know? They're just the stupidest idea of a pet. They're the complete opposite of dogs. I can't stand dogs for some reason. I like cats and animals that don't require attention. They have this fuck-you attitude. I'm stuck in this tank, I'm miserable and I hate you."

FOOTNOTE 2
Kurt's hatred of jocky, redneck humour, with its homophobia and sexism is well documented in the likes of 'Mr Moustache' – in a 1993 interview with US LGBT magazine *The Advocate*, he claimed that he used to go around Aberdeen spraypainting 'GOD IS GAY' on pickup trucks, a bumper-sticker style slogan that later made it into the lyrics of 'Scentless Apprentice'.

"I'm not afraid to say I like REM'

Kurt Cobain

The single reviews

Sliver

(Sub Pop)

NME, November 17, 1990

Sub Pop (still Seattle's hippest label) have yet to find anything to top Nirvana's fusion of rock and perfect pop. 'Sliver' sounds innocent enough, kicking off like one of Kurdt Kobain's kiddie novelty records. Suddenly, without warning, somebody throws a massive feedback bomb in the works, and the whole thing blows up in your face. The best record this label has put out since Mudhoney's 'Touch Me I'm Sick'. ■ EDWIN POUNCEY

Melody Maker, December 1, 1990

It continually surprises me that lesser writers are taken in by the seeming sloth of bands like Nirvana, mistaking it for some kind of laziness. Right, sure, that on its own isn't an excuse for anything, but they have so many fucking tunes lurking underneath their outer shell, it's damn near impossible not to trip over them as they flood out of the speakers. Take this, for example. Sure, the vocals are lazily throat-splitting, the guitars belligerently grungy, the bass up and out of the place... but check the melodies. The only reason this isn't Single Of The Week is because three even mightier singles were released this week. Got it? ■ EVERETT TRUE

MARTYN GOODACRE, ALAMY

The A-Z Of... Kurt Cobain

Many disparate influences went into making Kurt Cobain the slacker godhead of a generation. Here's 26 of them...

A

IS FOR...

Aberdeen

Hometown of Kurt and Krist, Aberdeen, Washington is a tiny logging town known as the Gateway To The Olympic Peninsula. Fitting since its population of 16,000 could practically fit into the reception area of the Olympic Stadium. 'Bleach' namechecked various locations in the town, but didn't reference the fact that, in the early 1900s, it was known as The Hellhole Of The Pacific and The Port Of Missing Men because of its proliferation of whorehouses and gambling joints, and also its high murder rate, largely down to the 140 men killed by a man called, we shit you not, Billy Gohl.

B

IS FOR...

The Beatles

Cobain's aunt Mari would supply the toddler Kurt with Beatles records until he was singing 'Hey Jude' at the age of two. For much of his early childhood, The Beatles were all Kurt listened to, and he would eventually describe John Lennon as his idol. He claimed to have written 'About A Girl' after listening to 'Meet The Beatles!' for three hours straight.

C

IS FOR...

The Cars

When his uncle offered Kurt the choice of a bike or a guitar for his 14th birthday in 1981, Kurt picked the guitar and set about learning his first songs. Among them was 'My Best Friend's Girl' by Rik Ocasek's new wave Americana troupe.

D

IS FOR...

Divorce

It's undeniable that his parents splitting when he was seven had a profound influence on the young Cobain. "I remember feeling ashamed, for some reason," he said. "I was ashamed of my parents. I couldn't face some of my friends at school anymore, because I desperately wanted to have the classic, you know, typical family. Mother, father. I wanted that security, so I resented my parents for quite a few years because of that." He'd see his mother being beaten by her new partner and felt resentful when his father remarried. This led to surly and bullying behaviour at school and his first therapy sessions.

E

IS FOR...

ELO One of Kurt's earliest loves, aged four, was Jeff Lynne's symphonic pop act. He was also into *The Monkees* theme tune, *Aquaman* comics, Terry Jacks' 'Seasons In The Sun' and, um, The Ramones.

F

IS FOR...

Flipper

Forerunners to the deliciously-named sludge metal scene, San Fran hardcore types Flipper were a major influence not just on Melvins and Black Flag with their distorted, ultra-slow punk noise, but on Nirvana too. Kurt made his own Flipper t-shirt that he wore in the 'Come As You Are' video, on *Saturday Night Live* in 1992 and on the sleeve on 'In Utero', while Krist actually played with the band in the 2000s.

G

IS FOR...

Glam

When they first formed as Skid Row, Kurt would play in platform shoes and crushed velvet bell-bottoms, with a look one onlooker described as "a parody of a glam costume".

H

IS FOR...

Homosexuality

At high school, one of Kurt's only friends was gay, which led to him being the subject of much homophobic abuse. He never denied that he was homosexual himself as he generally didn't like other people and it helped him maintain a lack of contact with them. "I started being really proud of the fact that I was gay even though I wasn't," he said, and went around spraying 'God Is Gay' on vehicles in Aberdeen. It was only when his friend made a pass at him that he came out as straight, although he'd claim to be "gay in spirit" and write in his journals, "I am not gay, although I wish I were, just to piss off homophobes."

I

IS FOR...

Ireland Kurt was convinced that his family name originated at Cobane in County Cork. In fact, Kurt's forefathers, shoemakers by trade, originated in County Tyrone, from the village of Inishatieve. They migrated to Canada in 1875 before moving to Washington.

J IS FOR...

Jesus

After his parents' divorce, his father placed Kurt in the care of family and friends, and he wound up living with the born-again Christian family of a friend called Jesse Reed. Kurt took their religious philosophy to heart and became born-again himself, at least until he realised the error of his ways and renounced the faith in a series of anti-God rants. His interest in religion didn't wane though – Christian imagery would dot his future work, 'Lithium' would be written about his time with the Reed family and his band would be named Nirvana because of his new interest in Buddhism.

K IS FOR...

K Records

The indie label from Olympia run by Calvin Johnson, which Kurt became obsessed with to the point of getting their logo tattooed on his forearm.
K released records by the likes of Bikini Kill, Melvins and Shonen Knife in Kurt's time and would go on to sign Bis, Built To Spill, Modest Mouse, The Go Team and Beck.

L IS FOR...

Led Zeppelin

Like so many potential axe heroes before him, one of the first songs Kurt learnt to play on his first guitar was 'Stairway To Heaven'. When Nirvana were up and running, they'd cover Zep classics such as 'Immigration Song', 'Heartbreaker' and 'Dazed And Confused'.

M IS FOR...

Melvins

Not only the band that introduced Kurt and Krist and one of the pair's biggest influences, but also the catalyst for their first encounter with future drummer Dave Grohl. "Before I auditioned for the band, I talked to them on the phone, but I'd never met them," Dave said. "I'd seen them once backstage at a Melvins show, and I found them quite amusing. There was Krist, this big tall guy, jumping all around, and then there was Kurt, sitting in the corner like he was taking a shit. He was sitting there, legs crossed, not even looking at anybody."

R IS FOR...

Reading Festival

In August 1991, Nirvana made their Reading debut, one short year before they headlined. *NME*'s Keith Cameron wrote: "Spicing the hardy perennial 'Bleach' material with their stunning new pop nuggets, Nirvana crunched the mosh-pit into the danger-zone for the first time that day. 'Smells Like Teen Spirit', 'Come As You Are' and 'Breed' were each eagerly embraced by the thrilled crowd before things got silly... Hell, a killer pop triad of 'Sliver', 'Molly's Lips' and 'Love Buzz'. During the latter, Kurdt leapt 15 feet down into the crowd. Here was anti-rock god posturing at its most thrilling.
"All that remained was for Chris to hurl his bass at the startled drummer Dave Grohl – a sobering prospect, for sure – and then Kurdt clinched the issue by vaulting into the kit. Nirvana? This came pretty damn close."

S IS FOR...

The Sellouts

A short-lived Creedence Clearwater Revival covers band that Kurt and Krist formed in 1987 because they loved 'Bad Moon Rising' so much. The band collapsed once they realised there was no money in it.

T IS FOR...

Tracy Marander

Kurt's girlfriend when he was traveling to Olympia for gigs, who became the subject of 'About A Girl' after she'd argue with him to get a job rather than sleeping until the evenings and watching endless TV. Marander also took the sleeve photo for 'Bleach'.

U IS FOR...

Uncles

It was his Uncle Chuck who gave Kurt his first cheap second-hand Japanese guitar and amp, and his stoner Uncle Jim who got him into the Grateful Dead, Led Zeppelin and the druggier end of The Beatles.

N IS FOR...

Narcotics

A regular dope-smoker and drinker as a young man, Kurt was one of the last of his peers to try heroin. The drug gave him nervous tics, paranoid episodes and a fierce temper, and made him even more misanthropic than he had been before.

O IS FOR...

Olympia

As soon as Kurt was free to set out on his own, he began travelling to the Washington State capital of Olympia to see punk rock shows. A major cultural hub of the Puget Sound region, eventually Kurt would move there to write 'Bleach', and Nirvana played many of their early gigs at its Evergreen State College. Noted alumni from Evergreen State include *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening, writer Tom Maddox, Macklemore and Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill.

P IS FOR...

Polynesian Hotel, The

The hotel in Ocean Shores where Kurt worked as a janitor in order to save up the money for the first Nirvana demo tapes. He was rubbish at it though; most of the time he just slept in the guest rooms during work hours.

Q IS FOR...

Quarterflash

Kurt would claim that the first ever rock show he saw was by Melvins, and wrote about the experience at length in his journals. Several family members and classmates, however, have a different story: that he first saw AOR gurner Sammy Hagar and cheesy sax rockers Quarterflash at the Seattle Center Coliseum in 1983. Busted!

V IS FOR:

Vail, Tobi

Another of Cobain's girlfriends from the 'Bleach' era, Vail was a fanzine writer and Bikini Kill founder member with whom Kurt formed the duo Bathtub Is Real in 1990, recording songs on four-track. "Sometimes I'd sing on the songs he was writing and play drums on them," Vail said. "'He was really into the fact that I was creative and into music. I don't think he'd ever played music with a girl before. He was super-inspiring and fun to play with." Vail was also the inspiration for the line in 'Aneurysm', "*love you so much it makes me sick*" after he threw up out of infatuation when he first met her.

W IS FOR...

Wrestling

Never exactly the sporty type, Kurt did find he was a bit of a wrestling wiz at school after his dad forced him to enroll in his junior high wrestling team. He was brilliant at it, but hated the abuse he got from his coach and team-mates, and would throw matches in competitions just to upset his father.

X IS FOR...

Xenomania

Besides Led Zeppelin, The Beatles, Shonen Knife, Black Sabbath and ELO, Kurt also loved such foreign sounds as The Vaselines, AC/DC, Queen, Bowie and The Clash. For all its precise regionalistic roots, grunge was a global genre.

Y IS FOR...

YMCA

As in 'it's fun to swim at the...'. For a short time, to help him afford to be able to keep writing songs, Kurt worked as a swimming instructor at the Aberdeen YMCA.

Z IS FOR...

Zoomorphics

One of several bands that Nirvana supported over the summer of 1989 – the Zoomorphics show was put on by Sub Pop's Jonathan Poneman at Seattle's Central Tavern – to audiences of virtually nil. It was at shows like this that Kurt and Krist began smashing up their equipment to make up for the fact that they were only playing to half a dozen bodies. The trail of destruction had begun...

In their own words... Nirvana on Bleach

"When I write a song the lyrics are the least important thing. I can go through two or three different subjects in a song and the title can mean absolutely nothing at all. Sometimes I try to make things harder for myself, just to try to make myself a bit more angry. I try out a few subconscious things I suppose, like conflicts with other people. Most of the lyrics on the 'Bleach' album are about my life in Aberdeen. It was like 'I'm pissed off. Don't know what about. Let's just scream negative lyrics, and as long as they're not sexist and don't get too embarrassing it'll be okay'. I don't hold any of those lyrics dear to me."
KURT COBAIN

"All the songs are slow and grungy, and they're tuned down to really low notes, and I screamed a lot... but at the same time that we were recording, we had a lot more songs, like 'About A Girl. In fact, 'Polly' was written at that same time too. It's just we chose to put more abrasive songs on the 'Bleach' album. So, it really wasn't a matter of evolving, within just a year, you know. We've always liked pop music, and we've always had a few songs like that."
KURT COBAIN

"I think we've been a pop band before we even recorded the 'Bleach' album. 'About A Girl' is really the only pop song that had ended up on the 'Bleach' but we had written many like it before."
KURT COBAIN

"All in all, despite the difficulties laying down the drums because of the way they were set up, we'd listen back and I remember the smiles. It was the first time I was in the studio to do a record. That was cool. It was amazing to hold an LP vinyl in your hands. I've had records my whole life, and now here was one that I was on!"
CHAD CHANNING

"We waited for the businesses to close and we'd make a racket, but downtown was empty so we could be loud. Somebody brought a video camera over, and that's what you see in the '[With The] Lights Out' box set."
KRIST NOVOSELIC, ON EARLY REHEARSALS ABOVE HIS MOTHER'S HAIRDRESSING SALON

"We had to save money. If it was digital, it would have been preserved. We were recording on 8-track, half-inch tape. Even having 'Blew' survive is amazing."
Chad Channing

Krist, on recording the album ▶ "To save money, we didn't screw around. I thought we had a good work ethic."

"Working on 'About a Girl', the song didn't have a title, so I asked Kurt, 'What is that song about?' He said 'About a girl.' I said 'Why don't you just call it that?' So he made this quirky smile and said 'OK!'"
CHAD CHANNING

"I loved 'Bleach' the first time I heard it. I thought it was a great record. It had everything that I really loved in music - it had the big Beatles influence on 'About A Girl', songs like 'Paper Cuts' and 'Sifting' were heavy as balls and 'Negative Creep' was just amazing. I remember that girls liked 'Bleach' too. I had a girlfriend that liked Nirvana, and I was, like, 'You like a band that I like? Wow!'."
DAVE GROHL

"When 'Bleach' came out, it was like everywhere we played people knew who we were. All the venues we played were just packed with people and it was kind of a rush. It was like 'Wow. this is so wild.' Before we had some packed shows, we had a lot of shows that, y'know, didn't have a lot of people as well."
CHAD CHANNING

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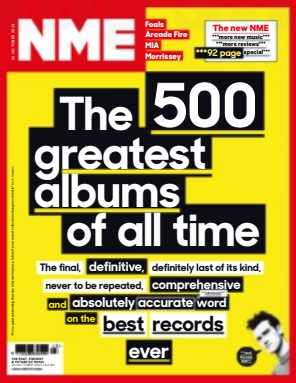

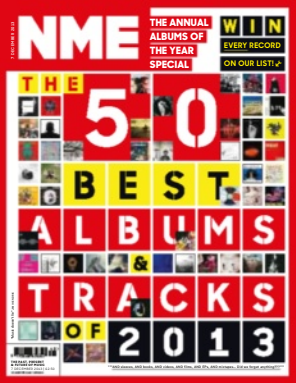

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